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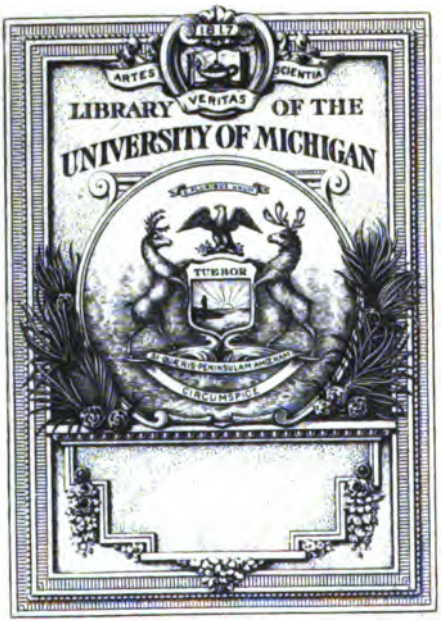
MASTER CHRISTOPHER

A 922,437

MRS. HENRY DE LA PASTURE

(LADY CLIFFORD)



Bequest of
Orma Fitch Butler
Asst.Professor of Latin

828
D3382..

Master Christopher

De La Pasture, Elizabeth (Harrison)

Master Christopher

By

Mrs. Henry de la Pasture

(Lady Clifford)

Author of "Peter's Mother" "Catherine's Child," "The Tyrant," "The Lonely Lady of Grosvenor Square," etc.

"There is not a thought or feeling, not an act of beauty of nobility whereof man is capable, but can find complete expression in the simplest, most ordinary life."—MAETERLINCK.

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To

J. E. C.

THIS STORY IS INSCRIBED

Happy he
With such a mother! Faith in woman-kind
Beats with his blood, and trust in all things high
Comes easy to him.

Tennyson

C. F. BUTLER
BEQUEST
6-V-40

Master Christopher

Master Christopher

CHAPTER I

ANTHONY DENYS, of Moreleigh, lived in the little ancient Manor House, scarcely more than a cottage, which had given its name to the mighty building known as Moreleigh Abbey, and to the Famous West Country deer park, wherein both dwellings were situated.

Of all the estates inherited by his father, the late General Sir Anthony Denys, K.C.B., he possessed only one small farm, and this deep-walled, lattice-windowed, many-gabled residence, hidden by the slopes of the surrounding hillocks, and sheltered by the sturdy cob and slated walls of its sunny garden and orchard.

His family portraits hung round the long low oak-panelled drawing-room, which was full of beautiful old furniture and relics of the past.

For though his income was less than six hundred a year, and though he wore threadbare clothes and kept only one man and a maid to wait upon himself and his aged mother, and though he spent most of his time in his carpenter's shed, and mended his own gates, and did a thousand odd jobs with his own

hands, yet he was also a polished and courteous gentleman, who had held a commission in the Guards, and in his early youth been popular in London drawing-rooms and London clubs. He was now popular in the narrow surroundings of his own countryside as Denys of Moreleigh, whose ancestors had been owners of the Abbey since the year 1541, when Henry VIII. had granted the site of a ruined monastery and its surrounding lands to one Sir Anthony Denys who was lord of the adjacent manor.

Old Simon Tucker, the last Abbot of Moreleigh, whose revenues at the Dissolution had been computed at £290, had been forced to watch the expulsion of the community, the stripping of the lead from the roof of his beloved convent, and its subsequent partial demolition.

The poor old religious, being infirm and dying, had been carried, broken-hearted, to the shelter of the Manor House, offered him in compassion by his supplanter.

There he expired, kindly entreated to the end by the gallant knight, who in the meantime was busy converting the remains of the sacred building into a mansion for his own use, incorporating therein the piers and arches which had once supported the central tower of the church.

The great Abbey orchards were turned into pleasure grounds and gardens, and the rich pastures of the monks' cattle into a deer park of nearly a thousand acres.

To salve his conscience, doubtless, and to satisfy his passion for building, Sir Anthony erected a church before he died, dedicating it to the patron saint of the Dominican order his royal master has dispossessed. Here the remains of the Abbot were finally interred,

and tradition said that the figure of a Black Friar had been seen on All Souls' Day, praying before the altar tomb of the founder, Sir Anthony Denys, Kt., ob. 1579.

The tomb was at any rate still extant, and in a fine state of preservation, panelled in quatrefoil, and retaining on the upper slab effigies of the worshipful knight lying between his two wives, and above, in two groups, the small kneeling figures of his twelve sons and daughters.

The Abbey had descended from father to son, in an unbroken line, until it had devolved upon the present Anthony's father, the late General.

But through the extravagance of his progenitors, and the ill-luck of his immediate predecessor, a famous patron of the turf, the estate had become impoverished and so encumbered by mortgages that the most rigid economy could hardly have enabled the General to uphold even the shadow of the ancient dignity of his home. Far from exercising economy, the new heir began his reign by inaugurating costly improvements and repairs, and entertaining lavishly, with the result that he presently found himself in dire straits for money, and obliged to contemplate letting the Abbey.

Here his nearest, most important neighbour, Lord Erriff, of Kellacombe, came to his assistance.

Lord Erriff was not a West Country man, and had been best known before his retirement and acceptance of a peerage as Thomas Garry, the witty Irish lawyer and politician, who had come from small beginnings to hold an important position in the Liberal Government of the day. He introduced to Sir Anthony a would-be tenant, one Mr. Christopher Thorverton, who had been his eldest son's bosom friend at Oxford.

Mr. Thorverton's father, a Lancashire mill-owner,

had recently died, and the young man, finding himself completely independent and possessed of great wealth, desired to settle down near his friend's home, and in a neighbourhood where he was sure of plenty of sport and, as he hoped, plenty of company.

He had not been popular as an undergraduate, and he appeared, save for a few distant and needy cousins, to be almost alone in the world; these two facts doubtless made him cling the more closely to Jack Garry, who was inclined to be wild, and more than inclined to be extravagant, and who no doubt found a wealthy and generous crony occasionally useful.

He brought Christopher to his parents' house, and reconciled them to the young man's want of polish by declaring him to be the best and truest friend he had in the world.

Lord Erriff was perhaps less fastidious than old Sir Anthony would have been. He made careful enquiries, found there was nothing against Thorverton's character, and that the reports of his wealth had scarcely been exaggerated; and persuaded his neighbour to accept him as a desirable tenant.

The former occupants of the Abbey, their personal dignity nothing abated by their change of abode, lived haughtily in the cottage, while the newcomer dwelt as humbly as possible in the mansion, enlivened by the frequent company of young Garry; who shot his coverts for him, rode his horses in the local races (which Thorverton would fain have done for himself had his size and weight permitted), and spent merry evenings with him and a few companions of the same age: playing cards and billiards, singing Irish songs to a banjo, which he thrummed with great ability, and drinking not a little of his host's wine. Young Garry was looked upon askance by his social equals in the

neighbourhood, but beloved if not respected by his social inferiors, with whom he chose to be hail-fellow-well-met, and who nicknamed him "Handsome Jack," and found him excellent company.

Lord Erriff at last opened his eyes to the fact that his heir was acquiring bad habits and wasting a good deal of time. He acted with energy: obtained a post for him in the Diplomatic Service, and packed him out of the country.

Christopher Thorverton missed his friend, but later on Fate intervened to give him a new interest in life.

Sir Anthony, instead of occupying himself harmlessly with his farming and gardening, wherein his losses need not have exceeded a few hundreds a year, chose to gamble on the Stock Exchange, with the results to be expected from one who had neither knowledge nor experience of business.

His speculations failed, and his liabilities overwhelmed him.

He was forced to sell the Moreleigh estates, and the tenant of the Abbey suddenly became its owner, sparing his landlord the necessity for a public sale by making a liberal offer for such of its contents as could not be removed conveniently to the limited precincts of the Manor House, the only entailed portion of the property.

Only the most sacred of the family treasures, and a small proportion of the family portraits could be in honesty retained, and none of the land beyond the actual surroundings of the Manor House.

Here Sir Anthony, crestfallen, settled down for life with his wife and the son of their old age, under the humble, stone-tiled roof which had once sheltered old Simon Tucker; and, perchance, the ghost of the Abbot smiled.

Presently an orphan kinswoman, a distant cousin and a ward in Chancery, came to share and incidentally to enliven their retirement. She was an heiress in a small way, possessing some four or five hundred a year of her own; and an allowance was made by the Court for her maintenance.

Lady Denys, a determined and energetic woman of four-and-fifty, would fain have planned an eventual marriage between her handsome silent son and his pretty clever cousin, in whom she found a companion and daughter after her own heart; but though the boy and girl had many tastes in common, sharing a love of music and a passion for water-colour drawing, yet they showed no inclination to fall in with her wishes. The difference in age was on the wrong side, the girl being Anthony's senior by a couple of years; and while at twenty Elizabeth Denys was a charming and surprisingly mature and decided young woman, Anthony, developing more slowly, was at eighteen a shy and awkward lad.

Lady Denys was even more disappointed, however, when her adopted child fell in love with Christopher Thorverton, now nearing six-and-thirty; rough-spoken still, and exceedingly plain of face, but also the big, strong, resolute man of a maiden's dream.

Whether his ownership of the Abbey or the glamour of his wealth, or his dominating personality alone was responsible for her infatuation, Sir Anthony and Lady Denys could not tell. In their eyes Mr. Thorverton appeared to be an uninteresting, middle-class man, with self-assertive manners and a temper obstinate and uncertain.

He had developed not a little since his shy undergraduate days, when he had been so completely under the influence of his friend Garry. Lord Erriff con-

gratulated himself unceasingly upon the change in the character of his heir, whose unusual ability, aided by good luck and that indefinable quality called charm, had caused him to become a more or less distinguished man before he was five-and-thirty. His father was now inclined to blame Christopher Thorverton for his son's early indiscretions; and looked coldly upon the new owner of Moreleigh, who was no more popular in his own neighbourhood than he had been at college. Yet there was nothing to be said against his character, and he was acknowledged to be a good sportsman, a hard rider, and a generous landlord.

The Court of Chancery had no fault to find with the owner of £30,000 a year, and Elizabeth Denys in due course became Mrs. Christopher Thorverton, thereby estranging herself considerably from her own family. Nevertheless, she implored her impersonal guardians to hand over her fortune to the relatives who had guarded her girlhood so tenderly. The Court settled it inexorably upon herself and the children of the marriage. Nor would the old General probably have consented to accept any such benefit at her hands.

He tried to balance his distaste for the marriage by the reflection that a Denys once more reigned over the Abbey, but in spite of this consoling thought he looked at his son and sighed.

Lady Denys sighed more deeply, for she believed the high-spirited and beautiful girl would have suited Anthony exactly as a wife, and would have exerted the necessary influence over him to inspire him, in some measure, with her own ambition and energy.

But Anthony the younger possessed a calm and contented disposition, and was not to be inspired against his will by any woman on the face of the earth.

The keynote of his being was simplicity. Through-

out his life he was inclined to be rather silent than otherwise, but when he spoke it was to the point, and even as a boy he was seldom or never heard to say a foolish thing. He was tall and finely-formed, with handsome hazel eyes and singularly well-shaped features, resembling his mother closely in appearance though not at all in disposition.

He did not care for study, but being plentifully endowed with industry and a certain kind of tact, which is almost more serviceable to its owner than brilliance of intellect, he passed through his school and college days creditably, while his good humour, good looks, and good manners made him popular alike with his companions and his masters.

He had been destined for the Guards, and in spite of his gentle protests and the change in his parents' fortunes, his destiny was fulfilled.

The old General and his wife would have starved rather than sacrifice that last ambition for their heir. Secretly and unknown to Anthony, his father raised money upon his remaining property in order to make him the necessary allowances.

He hoped the young man would retrieve his fortune by a wealthy marriage, and young Anthony attended to his parents' exhortations on this subject with the sympathetic interest that constituted one of his greatest charms as a listener.

He occupied a small apartment in St. James Street, went out a great deal in London, and visited much at country houses. He was a fine horseman, a good shot, and a fairly accomplished musician; his manners were distinguished and charming in their amiability. He danced well, and excelled in all kinds of indoor and outdoor games; wherefore his company was much sought after, and he received not a little

adulation from romantically-inclined females; but he remained curiously indifferent, unspoilt, and unaffected; also, to the chagrin of his father and mother, he remained unwed.

Elizabeth Thorverton, in spite of her charm and her cleverness, did not in the first years of her marriage succeed in making her husband welcome in that little world of London where her cousin Anthony was best known.

Christopher's personality was too marked to be overlooked; he could not slip quietly into society as Mrs. Thorverton's husband.

But it seemed that the more zealously he tried to please, the more unpopular he became; Elizabeth, uneasily sensible of the impression he created, would fain in those earlier days have sacrificed her love of the world, which was considerable, to her love for her husband, which still obsessed her, and have sought happiness with him and her little son in that country house which they now visited too seldom, in consequence of their many engagements elsewhere.

But such a withdrawal was in accord neither with his vanity nor with his wishes. He was vain of his wife's beauty, bought a house in Mayfair, and insisted upon entertaining largely, if somewhat indiscriminately, though his methods of ostentative extravagance were not those by which Elizabeth would have preferred to attain celebrity.

The inevitable happened: she awoke from that passion of first love which had blinded her perception, and became bitterly and acutely aware of those deficiencies in Christopher which had always prejudiced her relatives in his disfavour.

She realised that neither mentally nor spiritually

was there any companionship for her in the mate she had chosen.

The golden secret of good breeding which some in high places know not, and which so many a peasant possesses unaware, was not his. He could not be intimate without becoming familiar.

Her loyalty fought in vain against her fastidiousness, which was daily outraged by his lack of all the finer perceptions. Christopher could be well-behaved when he was in a good humour; but when he was annoyed the veneer cracked, and the solid commonness beneath was displayed.

He loved his wife, but gradually he became uncomfortably aware that he was not her equal, and he chafed under the knowledge. He possessed that order of intellect which after slow and careful pondering perceives only the obvious, and is even inclined to explain it at length and in detail; a proceeding calculated to madden a listener able to grasp the gist of his meaning and the whole of its triviality almost before he had uttered half a dozen words.

He began to find out that his conversation, when he was minded to converse, bored his wife, though she endeavoured to conceal the unfortunate fact.

The consciousness inclined him the more strongly to assert himself; he determined to contest a seat in Parliament; and here, once more, his old friend Garry, who had just succeeded to his father, came to his assistance. Mr. Thorverton, though hardly more than forty years old, had already the heavy middle-aged appearance which often overtakes the mortal of dull brain and gross appetite early in life; while the second Lord Erriff at the same age was graceful and active as ever; at the very zenith of his popularity, powers, and good looks, reported to be irresistible, and pos-

sessed of every charm of speech and manner which could add to that reputation. Thanks to his influence and energy, Christopher won a victory for his party, and exulted in the hope that his wife would become known as a great Liberal hostess, though her sympathies up to this time had been incurably Tory.

But Elizabeth had recovered from the extreme seriousness of early youth, which had naturally inclined her to believe her own opinions unchangeable and infallible. She proved unexpectedly amenable, and was converted by Lord Erriff's arguments to the opposite side, throwing herself with all the eagerness of her disposition into the political fray. She was considerably younger and infinitely more lively at five-and-twenty than she had been at the time of her marriage, this being a common development of over-precocity; and she threw herself whole-heartedly into the new life which now opened before her, and which offered so many attractions to a charming and beautiful woman surrounded by all the advantages wealth could bestow. The birth of her little daughter scarcely interrupted her gaieties, and reports of her frivolity and worldliness seriously disturbed her relatives, who, in spite of the estrangement caused by her marriage, still loved her tenderly.

It began to be rumoured that the Thorverton *ménage* was not a happy one; and that the new M. P. had acquired habits of intemperance.

When the Government went out it was announced that Mr. Thorverton would not seek re-election, and people saw in this statement a confirmation of both reports.

It was at this juncture that Christopher was deprived of the companionship of his constant friend, Lord Erriff, who met his end suddenly in the hunting-field, being thrown from his horse and killed on the spot.

The neighbourhood had scarcely recovered from the shock of this intelligence when it was followed by a rumour that a separation between Mr. and Mrs. Thorverton was imminent, which gave place to the certainty that it was already an accomplished fact.

There had been but little intercourse for some time past between the Abbey and the Manor House; but old Sir Anthony felt it was time to assert himself, and it was with hands which trembled with indignation that he took down his Malacca cane with the gold top, and marched up to his old home to demand an interview with the owner, who had arrived there on the previous evening.

He found a broken-down, unhappy man sitting alone in the study which had once been the General's own.

"She 's left me," said Christopher, facing the thin, shrivelled, but still upright figure of the eighty-year-old soldier.

Thorverton was a big, stout, burly man, with a face now grown coarse and red, and haggard blood-shot eyes that told their own tale of a ruined constitution.

"I insist upon knowing what has happened!" said Sir Anthony, with dignity.

"You 'll hear nothing from me," said Thorverton, in dogged, obstinate, but always unhappy tones. "Look here, there 's nothing any one can say to me that I have n't said to myself. There won't be a word of scandal, not now, nor ever. You need n't be afraid. We 've settled it all between ourselves, she and I. I 've got my boy, and she 's taken her little girl—and gone."

"Gone—where?" cried old Sir Anthony, glaring at him.

"Abroad to study painting, as she used to want to when she was a girl," said Christopher, rather

savagely. "Oh, she'll be all right, happier without me than with me. I don't deceive myself on that score. She would n't take a halfpenny of my money. She's got her own. About half as much as she used to spend on her clothes. And she and little May, and the nurse, Margery Snow, went off together from London yesterday morning."

"Thorverton, a man and his wife don't part like this for nothing. Are you blaming her or yourself for this terrible break-up?" said the old man, looking very pale.

"No one had better blame her in my hearing," said Christopher Thorverton, turning purple, and striking the table heavily. "I've been a fool—that's the beginning and the end of it. That's enough for me to say, is n't it?" He grew angry. "Hang it all, you've no right to come questioning me! You've all looked down on me. The more civil you were the more I felt it; but I'll be questioned about my wife by no man living. She can write and tell you anything she chooses."

"You know very well she would n't tell us anything to your discredit. When did she ever listen to a word against you, though we warned her against this marriage a thousand times? Every one could see how totally unsuited to each other you were," said the General, angry in his turn.

"Ay, she married me in spite of you all! I know that," said Thorverton, and he broke down, sobbing, with his face in his hands.

The General could not hit a man who was down; and he was besides exceedingly soft-hearted. Though he came to denounce, he remained to console.

"She'll come back one of these days," he found himself saying. "It can't be as serious as all this.

Whatever you may have done—" Christopher looked up at him savagely with his red-rimmed, dull eyes, but he did not speak. "Whatever you may have done, since she is a woman and loved you once, you may be very sure she loves you still," said Sir Anthony, and thought to himself: "God knows why, for a more unattractive, common-looking brute I never set eyes on!" but he had a belief in woman's fidelity which nothing could shake, since it was founded on his love for his own wife.

"She loved me once, and I love her still, better than anything in the world!" said Thorverton sadly.

"Then it will all come right, my dear fellow."

"It will never come right. Now, Sir Anthony, you've said your say, and there's an end of it. No one else had better mention this subject to me. It's between her and me, as I told you."

"But, good gad, Thorverton, it's a shocking thing for the boy. She can't part from her only son like this!" cried Sir Anthony, with a start. "Poor little Chris, where is he?"

"That's all settled. He'll go to school. He's nearly eight, and he was to have gone anyway in three months' time. She'd settled the school and everything. He's a sturdy chap—beyond the women already," said his father, with a touch of pride.

"I can't understand her leaving the boy!" the General repeated, shaking his white head and thinking of Anthony.

"Chris is not a mammy's boy," said Thorverton roughly. "You leave him to me. He's my own sort, and I know how to take care of him. His mother will hear of him when she wants to. It's the girl who takes after *her* that's the apple of her eye!" He laughed harshly. "Let us alone, I tell you. We un-

derstand each other, and we know what we're doing, she and I," growled Christopher; and no word more could the General get out of him.

Sir Anthony repeated the conversation to his wife.

"That she should leave her only son! And I can't understand why she did not appeal to us instead of going off like this. She knows we should have sympathised with her. She knows we never liked Thorverton nor thought him worthy of her."

"But that is one of the reasons she did not come," said Lady Denys thoughtfully. "Poor Elizabeth! How she must suffer! For she is very proud, and she was very much in love when she married him, and determined to prove we were all wrong in our judgment of him."

"She'll come back," said the General. "If she loved him once, you may depend on it she loves him still. Women are like that."

Lady Denys was silent.

Sir Anthony died four years later, and his son immediately resigned his commission, gave up his rooms in London, and came home to live with his mother, to whom he devoted himself with a tenderness that was regarded as remarkable, though in any other country but his own such filial piety would have been taken as a matter of course. He paid off his father's liabilities, arranged his affairs, and let his farm lands, thus providing himself with an income sufficient to supply the necessities of the quiet existence he led with his surviving parent. He occupied himself with his music, his sketching, and his carpenter's shop; was interested in the village cricket and football, and his magisterial duties, and, though he had given up hunting, rode occasionally to a meet. He appeared

to be perfectly contented always, but his old mother, secretly ambitious, chafed over his content, and suffered acutely from the restlessness that passed him by.

Christopher Thorverton, too, lived a life of complete seclusion, save for his regular appearance in the hunting-field. He rode hard, in spite of his increasing weight, and he also drank hard, and smoked incessantly; but his constitution seemed to triumph over his habits.

His associates were not well-chosen, and consisted of a few needy parasites who ignored his rough ways and rougher speech and flattered him and little Christopher, accepting nominal duties in the great establishment Thorverton chose to maintain, in order that they might live at his charge. But young Christopher, though he was thus not particularly well brought up, and reported to be idle at school and too fond of the society of the stable-boys at home, had also a great liking for the company of his cousin Anthony at the Manor House. The days were few during his holiday time when he did not visit him in his workshop, looking up to him with secret hero-worship, and contrasting him with his father's friends, to the disadvantage of the latter. He was persuaded he could learn to carpenter by watching Anthony at work, though he was too idle to persevere with any of the tasks set him by his patient cousin at his own request.

One morning in early summer Anthony's servant, John Youatt, brought in his master's shaving-water with a very grave countenance.

The only surviving Denys of Moreleigh was now thirty-nine years old; a singularly handsome man, with a clear complexion and slightly frosted dark hair curling over his well-shaped head.

He drew his watch from beneath his pillow and glanced at it.

"It is not eight o'clock," he said in surprise, for Youatt, like himself, generally observed military punctuality.

"No, sir, I beg your pardon, sir," said Youatt deferentially; "but there 's bad news from the Abbey, sir, and I thought you would wish to be told at once. Squire Thorverton 's ill, sir."

"Why did n't they send for me?"

"They have sent, sir. His man, Cloberry, called him at seven according to orders, and found him in a fit. Apoplexy, sir. He telephoned to Burstin, and the doctor got here in his motor in fifteen minutes, sir. The doctor can't tell for certain, sir, but he thinks it 's a question of hours."

It proved to be a question of hours.

Anthony reached the Abbey in time to find Christopher Thorverton still living, though wholly unconscious; but all was over before young Christopher, who was at Oxford, could return to his father's side.

CHAPTER II

THROUGH the warm summer darkness, lit faintly by rose-coloured globes of electric light hung among the lime trees, May Thorverton stole quietly to the edge of the terrace garden on the mountain side.

Leaning her elbows on the parapet, she looked over the heights clothed with foliage, down to the still lake and the dim plains which lay far, far below; where little towns and baby villages, diminutive trees and toy steamers were painted, as it were, with a pencil dipped in the grey mists of evening, and touched here and there with twinkling points of light. Though the far horizon yet showed a translucent rose and silver line upon the waters, the glory of the sunset had died away from the motionless reflections deepened now and then into black shadows, of the sombre mountains opposite—grey mountains with rugged outlines already muffled in the mysterious clouds of evening, and melting into the purple.

The silence of the hills—the everlasting silence of death—seemed embodied in that stealthy visible approach of night.

Yet thus, as a child, had she dreamt of heaven; the sea of glass stretching towards the golden radiance of distance; the lost souls crying from the shadows, and pale spirits flitting across the still violet waters into the light, becoming visible only to be absorbed at last into the glory.

With a stifled sob, and a fearful glance around her, the girl stretched forth two little hands suddenly from the soft wrap which was folded about her shoulders.

Oh, where was that soul, so passionately loved and loving, so eagerly responsive to her slightest call? Why could it not make itself visible in this mysterious solemn space?

May held her breath in an agony of longing and listening, straining her blue eyes vainly lest that which was no longer of earth should yet be made manifest to earthly sight.

But all was still, silent, and solitary.

Of what avail her anguish. Her mother—that being so full of brightness and understanding, of tears and laughter—was dead. The little slender creature, so exquisite of aspect, so fastidious and delicate in all her ways, lay cold in her mountain grave.

May started nervously at the sound of a footstep, but recognising the figure that came slowly down the stone steps which led from the hotel gardens to the terrace, she turned again towards the lake and waited listlessly, standing by the parapet.

The light of the electric globes showed a middle-aged woman, heavily built, but comely of aspect, with ruddy mottled face and anxious, tender, light-blue eyes.

"I did n't want fur to disturb you, but I felt I could n't wait no longer!" she faltered. "I was getting afraid, and I did n't know where you was. You been out such a *long,* long whiles, Miss May!"

"I came out here, where only a few nights ago we were walking together, she and I," said May, with the calm of despair in her young voice. "I wanted to feel her presence if I could. Don't be frightened, Margery, I am not going to lie down and die on her grave, though that is what I would like to do."

"Oh, Miss May, you must n't talk like that!"

"No, I shall never again be able to say to any one what I really think. For who would understand me now *she* is gone? I came out here where it is so beautiful and so silent—out of the hotel—to try and realise what has happened. But I can't realise it any more than I could in my room. I find myself vaguely thinking she will be laughing at me presently and telling me it was all a dream—a bad dream."

"Miss May, there 's time enough to realise it, my poor lamb. There 's no call to dwell on the thought," said the older woman, with an involuntary sob. "'T is of the present you 've got to think now, not of the past."

"Do you think I don't know that? But it 's only been the *past* such a little while," said the girl, with a wan smile. Then she pushed her soft brown hair from the young brow that throbbed, and the young eyes that ached with the shedding of many tears.

"Oh, Margery, you 're quite right! I ought to pull myself together. It seems so strange that now it is for *me* to settle all that must be done! I suppose we must go back to the little flat at Vincennes; this hotel is dreadfully dear, even though it is out of the season. She said we ought not to stop too long. But I feel as though I could n't bear to leave the last memories of her, and yet—I want to get away. But, oh! to think of going there alone, to face her empty studio." She broke down and sobbed helplessly for a moment.

"Oh! Miss May, listen to me; for maybe 't will not be you that has to settle after all," said Margery, putting motherly arms round the slight figure shaken with weeping. "Do 'ee calm yourself, my darling, and make an end of crying as she would have bid you.

Think on what they say, Miss May, 'There be a time to mourn and a time to be comforted.'"

"It's a little too soon to be comforted, you old thing!" said May, with her wet cheek pressed wearily against her nurse's honest face.

"'T is what your poor mamma would have wished!" cried her faithful consoler reproachfully. "Here 's four days and three nights you 've cried yourself sick and blind, and what 's the good of it all, my lamb? It won't bring her back. And you 've got to live and do your duty."

"How shall I know what my duty is now? It was so easy when she was there—to talk to her and read to her, and keep every one away from her when she was at work, and yet coax her away from her work myself sometimes; and to help her find subjects for her pictures, and to do the marketing and the accounts; and sing to her and pet her a little when she was tired, poor darling!"

"Oh, Miss May! can you find no happiness in the thart that you was arl that to your poor mamma? For you was arl that, and mar!" cried Margery, relapsing more strongly into her native dialect as she grew more agitated. "Is n't it a comfort to think you 've got nart to reproach yourself with—nart to regret in luking back? Oh, just think if you 'd got onything to reproach yourself with—'t is that as adds the sting to sorrow. You 've niver a thart of that, my child."

"Of course I have things to reproach myself with!" cried May in unsteady tones, "but never with not loving her enough. We were everything in the world to each other, but that is what makes it so much harder."

"Oh, no, my dear! Oh, no!"

"But it does. For what is the object of my life now? I don't know where to go. I don't know what to do."

"Miss May, sit down and let me tark to you for a little whiles."

"What is it, Margery? You are trembling. It is you who must sit down. What do you want to say to me? Has anything happened?"

She forced her old nurse into one of the garden chairs, next to the parapet, and drew another beside her, taking the shaking, toil-worn fingers anxiously into her own little white feverish hands, and perceiving with alarm that the usually ruddy face had paled.

"What is it, dear Margery, dear Nana? Tell me quickly! Don't say you are ill! Oh, Margery, you would n't leave me, too, would you?" she cried in terror, for, after all, she was little more than a child.

"God forbid! There 's nart that ails me, except that I 'm a girt old fool. I meant to say it gradual like, but I don't know how," said Margery helplessly. "Oh, Miss May, your brother 's come!"

A moment earlier May would have smiled to scorn the thought that any happening on earth was possible that could make her forget her grief for an instant.

Nevertheless, she did forget it in the strange thrill engendered by those words.

A sudden intense emotion of another kind than grief seized upon her being; an emotion born of shy hopes that had lurked for years in the background of her thoughts—of sacred childish memories, of a dream, long dreamt in secret, that was at last to be realised; together with that strange flash of intuition that occasionally lights upon mortals—the certainty that this emotional experience had been hers before, in some forgotten past. . . .

The momentary dizziness was over, and she was

holding on to the kind, strong, homely hand—that had worked for her and tended her for so many years —saying in a steady voice that sounded far away in her ears:

"Where is he? When did he come?"

"He came by the last funicular, about an hour ago. And Monsieur Georges had the sinse to send for me and not for you. I told him I would come and find you. *Table d'hôte* was just going in, and he went on in with the rest to get his dinner after his long journey."

A dull shock of disappointment dispelled poor May's dreaming, and brought her back to earth.

"To dinner?"

"He must have wanted it after his long journey," said Margery, with the simplicity and common-sense of her kind.

Then she began to cry again, and sobbed forth the words:

"To think I seen him again at last after arl these years. My Master Christopher, as I fritted so fur leaving. 'T is arl very well fur you, as was too young to remember him, but I thart I should have dropped to see him standing there; the moral image of his papa, but just his old self fur arl that, luking at me, and saying: 'You 're Margery; I remember you quite well.' And only seven year old when we took and left him. Poor bye! Poor little Master Chris, in his beautiful green velvet suit as he could n't abear!"

Could she not remember him? May realised with a pang of jealousy how little she remembered, and yet how vivid her few memories were.

She, too, saw little Master Chris in the green velvet suit he could not bear, and recalled a day that seemed

to her terrible, when he had persuaded a frightened little sister to cut off his long flaxen curls and help him burn then in a garden bonfire.

The sight and scent of a bonfire never failed to bring back that vision, which had always seemed to her the vision of a crime; but, with the curious reserve of childhood, she had never spoken of her earliest recollections to her mother, who believed, like Margery, that she remembered nothing of the home she had left at four years old.

But from time to time, in the odd lumber-room of memory, pictures of that home had been suddenly unveiled and lighted up for May. And in those pictures, the figure which loomed always the most distinctly was that of a little boy.

Oddly enough she never realised herself as three years younger than her brother.

There was a little boy named Chris, and sometimes Christie, and sometimes Master Christopher, whose ways a wise and well-behaved baby observed with surprise and horror, not unmingled with a fearful joy, —and whom she loved. . . .

My brother! Now she knew that the words brought a thrill of pride and affection and ownership. A feeling of warmth stole about her sad heart. After all she was not alone, not quite, quite alone, even though her mother. . . .

"Oh, Margery! stop crying and tell me. Would she have wished this? Would she?"

"Miss May, 't is my belief as a greater than she has brought it about," said Margery. Her light-blue eyes grew solemn. "Who am I to say what my poor lady would have wished or what she would have wanted? She was n't never one to speak her tharts to a servant, nor to any one, for that matter. But

't is Providence as has spoken. 'T is the voice of Nature has bid your brother come to you at this moment when she and your poor papa has both gone to the grave where arl must be forgiven and forgotten."

"Do you think," whispered May, "that it was really the news of—of his death that was in that paper that—that killed her? I think it must have been. But you said nothing to the doctor, and I did n't dare——"

"He did n't ask me. If he 'd asked me whether she 'd had a shock, I 'd have told him in duty bound," cried Margery; "but, going quietly in her sleep like that, how should he ask? It was lucky she called him in the day we came here, when he warned her it was a bit too high for her up here. He could tell of nothing but how he 'd warned her about the altitude being too much for her, and her laughing, and saying she must stay the week out, through having paid the *pension*. 'T was no business of these foreigners what news she 'd had. I told him the truth; that she 'd had a headache, and laid down quietly all the afternoon."

"Yes, that was true, and I kept away from her as you told me, little thinking," said May.

"She made me tell you she had a headache and that you were not to disturb her," said Margery. "I found her reading the English papers with her sweet face so white as her pillow, and she looked at me, and said: 'Margery, Mr. Thorverton 's been very ill,' in her quiet way, afraid I should scream or let on like the fool I am, if she said the truth straight out. But her dear face told me. . . . 'I must think what to do,' she said, and that I was n't to say a word to you for the present. As though I ever said a word about anything till she give me leave! . . . and in

the evening she was very quiet-like while I was brushing her hair; but she said I was to call her early and perhaps there might be an end now of her wandering life; that perhaps she would go home—to her boy—and I must be arl ready to pack her things in the marning; but when I found her in the marning-times, I knew it was the shock that killed her."

"If she had not died, she would have told me everything in the morning, would n't she?" entreated May, clinging to her.

"For certain sure she would, my lamb, for certain sure!"

"She kissed me so tenderly, and said: 'Good-night, my baby.' Those were her last words to me."

"You was arl the world to her."

"Oh, Margery, what was it that separated them? Though I don't want to ask anything she did n't wish me to know; but it is so dreadful to be kept in the dark at my age, and she would surely have told me, if she had dreamt she was going to die!"

"Don't dwell on what 's over and done with!" cried Margery distressfully. "There 's a many temptations in the world for the rich and great, as the poor and lowly are spared, Miss May. It may be that your dear mamma was hard on the poor master—she came of a proud family—or it may be again that he did n't make allowance for her being so young as she was. I know no more than the babe unbarn. But, however 't was they 're together now, and you may depend on it they 've forgiven each other. Fourteen years they 've lived apart, and her wandering like Cain over the face of the earth; and yet the news of his death killed her so sure as my name 's Margery Snow."

"She must have loved him all the time," murmured May.

"Niver tell me she did n't love him!" said Margery vehemently. "'T is a sad world. But, there, parents did n't arter quarrel, my dear. They did n't arter, though 't is not fur us to judge. But look to the trouble it brings on the children—you two, strangers, as should be arl in arl to one another at a time like this."

"Perhaps we may yet be all in all to one another. Perhaps they—both—wish it," said the girl, looking almost fearfully across the great abyss of darkness. "It 's so vain wishing, but—oh! if she had said one word—one word—it would make it so much easier."

"You may find something written down, among her papers, when you 've time and heart to go through them."

May shook her head.

"What could I find? Where? There was her little desk, with the key on her dear watch-chain that I 'm wearing now, and the cheque-book and bank-book in it, and the accounts that I kept for her myself, and the money to take us to Paris; besides the lawyer's address that she always told me to write to if anything happened to her; the man who will tell me what I must do about business."

"Oh, my lamb, there 's your brother will tell you all that now! 'T is he that has the right to arrange her affairs—her own son."

"He is a stranger," said May jealously; and then in her heart to the little brother she remembered: "Oh, Chris, forgive me! she is your mother, too."

Through the dusk of the gardens dim shapes began to move, taking meaning as they descended to the softly-lighted terrace.

A little Frenchwoman, smartly dressed, with a lace

jacket, high heels, and a bird of paradise adorning an enormous hat, came into view in the rose-coloured glow of the electric globes; happy in the possession of a personable man, to whose arm she clung.

The couple, obviously on their honeymoon, passed May and her attendant, and, wandering a little way down the slope of the mountain-road below, disappeared among the trees into the darkness.

"Let us go in, or some of the people we know will come and speak to us," said May. "Dinner must be over."

CHAPTER III

MAY folded her wrap more closely about her head and shoulders, and flitted up the rock-bordered steps, and through the gardens into the great hotel, with the certainty of one who knew all the ins and outs of the place. Margery followed her through a side-entrance and down a long corridor, with highly-polished floor, to her room, which was on the same level as the *salle-à-manger*.

May took the key from her pocket, unlocked the door, and then entered her bedroom.

"Shall I fetch him now?" asked Margery anxiously. "Can you see him to-night, Miss May? Or shall I tell him you would rather wait till you've had your night's rest, and meet him to-morrow? You're not fit to be seen, my poor lamb!" she added compassionately.

"Haven't we had a lesson against putting things off?" said May bitterly. "Suppose *I* died in the night? What do I care how I look?"

But instinctively she surveyed her pale face and swollen eyes in the glass, and hastily unpinned her curly brown hair, and began to brush it.

"No, you are right. I can't see him like this. Mamma would n't have liked it. But bring me some warm water, Margery, and as soon as I have made myself decent, go and ask him to come," she said nervously.

Margery went off, obedient, and when she found herself alone, the girl, with her hair curling loosely about her shoulders opened the door of communication with the adjoining *pièce,* touched the switch of the electric light, and entered, with soft and hesitating steps.

The room was the counterpart of her own.

A bright-flowered paper, stained honey-tinted wainscoting and shutters, and highly-polished furniture to match. A blue and white balcony with an iron table and chair, and a wooden bedstead with a linen cover.

All was spotless, orderly, and empty.

May crept to the bedside and knelt down, leaning her little brown head and pale cheek against the pillow, with a gentle hopeless sorrow more pathetic than tears.

When Margery returned she was standing upon her iron balcony, looking out once more into the night.

The distant strains of the band floated to her across the lamplit grounds, and the stars brightened above her in a cloudless sky.

"Miss May, I met him. He says, when will you be ready?"

"In five minutes now," she said, with beating heart; and bathed her face and combed her soft hair, twisting it into a loose coil above her throbbing brow.

"He says will you go to him in the sitting-room?"

"What sitting-room? Before all the people? Can't he come here, to my room?"

"No, no! He 's ordered a private sitting-room—the one at the end here, that your poor mamma said would have been so nice. That you peeped into the evening we arrived."

"But the expense," faltered May, though the thought that her brother should have so considered her feel-

ings set her in a glow; and the warmth of hope and human love again stole about her heart.

"Oh, Miss May! what would *he* think of that? But how should you understand that have been brart up to be so careful?" said Margery, in subdued tones. "Put on your pretty frock, your evening one, my dear. It is black, and your mamma would have wished you to look nice to meet your brother!" she urged. "She thart so much of your looks, Miss May."

"Yes, she would have wished me to look nice—to meet my brother," said May, wondering at the strange sound of words that should have been so familiar. Hurrying, she put on the black evening gown. Then, passing once more through that empty bedroom, she entered the little salon beyond.

On the hearthrug, not much less nervous than herself, stood a young man, facing her. A young man of middle height, sturdy of build and obviously British.

The glare of the electric light showed him to be fair and clean-shaven, with blunt features, square chin, and closely-cropped hair. The heaviness of his jaw, and the hard lines of a mouth shut in a straight line without apparent curve of lip, gave him an obstinate and rather sullen expression.

He appeared the more ordinary because the girl before him was tall and slender, with that indefinable air which is called distinguished, for want of a better word; and because her features were so delicately pretty. Nevertheless, as they looked into each other's faces, the two pairs of dark blue eyes with their upcurling lashes were so exactly alike as to betray that the owners were brother and sister.

For a moment's space they stood in silence, contemplating each other; and then something in Christopher Thorverton's expression suddenly recalled the

little brother of her childish memories to May, and she stretched out her hands, crying aloud, as she had cried to him in her heart:

"Oh, Chris, Chris, though we have grown up strangers to each other, she was your mother, too!"

The ice was broken. The young man stood holding the little soft hands; awkward, unresponsive, yet, as she easily divined, not unsympathetic, though his words were matter-of-fact enough.

"I thought the best thing I could do was to come and fetch you home."

"But I know nothing about home," she said with a sound between a sob and a laugh, "except that it is somewhere in the South of England."

"Have you heard nothing of the Abbey—of Moreleigh—of Burstin?" he asked, as though thunderstruck.

May shook her head.

"I knew Margery was a West Country woman. That *she* came from Somersetshire. That is all. We lived our own life, and *she* never mentioned the past," she faltered.

Again he stood silent. Then he said:

"Well, you 'll see it all for yourself now. At least I hope so."

The meeting was sufficiently embarrassing, and he seemed to feel it more than she did; but at least the strangeness of it took from May all desire to cry any more.

"It's insufferably hot in here, is n't it?" he suggested suddenly. "How would it be if we went out on to the balcony?"

He led the way, and she followed him thankfully. She was glad to escape from the glare of the electric light, and though the night was a warm one, the air

and the comparative darkness of the balcony were alike refreshing.

Christopher took the chair nearest the railing, seated himself, and after a moment's hesitation, pulled a case from his pocket, and lit a cigarette.

"I can talk better if I smoke, and listen better, too," he said, with an awkward laugh.

"It is always easier to talk in the dark—or nearly dark. For there is just light enough from the room for us to see each other's faces," she answered.

May could not help noticing that her brother did not wait to ask her permission to smoke, nor offer her a chair before he seated himself.

She reproved herself immediately, saying: "He wants to show me that he accepts me as a sister. Brothers naturally do not stand on ceremony with their sisters." But none the less, the slight omission jarred upon her, for she was as fastidious in taste as she was quick in perception.

"I don't suppose you remember me at all," said Chris, looking carefully away from her and examining his cigarette with extraordinary intentness.

"Yes, I do. You are about the only thing I do remember—of England, of my babyhood really," she said timidly.

"Well, I remember *you!*" he said—"a queer solemn little toad with eyes like saucers."

The description was not as pleasing as May could have wished, and she laughed out before she was aware, and then stopped herself with a quick pang of horrified recollection.

"Then—if you remember me—you must remember—oh, how well you must remember *her!*" she said.

Christopher's tone changed.

"Of course," he said briefly.

Another silence fell.

Apparently he realised that his abruptness had disconcerted his sister, for when he spoke again it was in a tone less gruff and constrained.

"I say, I think the simplest thing would be for you and me to let bygones be bygones, and start fresh."

"Do you mean," said poor May, "that we are never to mention—anything about the past—to each other? But I thought that *you* were the one person whom I could ask without disloyalty to—to—them."

"Of course you may ask *me* anything," he said hastily. "But I mean—after to-night you won't want to be raking up things that are dead and gone, will you? Or talking to outsiders of why this and that and t'other happened?"

"Do you think I could speak of—them—to any one—but you?" said May, holding her head high. "But if there is anything I ought to know—I am not a child. I am eighteen."

"They never realise one grows up," said Christopher calmly, and for a moment the sensation of partisanship was delightful to her. But immediately she reproached herself for disloyalty.

"Of course I would n't wish to hear anything mamma did not wish me to know."

"It amounts to just this," said Chris, smoking hard, speaking very deliberately, and looking away from his sister with fair brows knitted above eyes that were so like hers, and so like another pair of eyes now closed in death. "For reasons best known to themselves, my father and mother, fourteen years ago, agreed to live apart. The rights and wrongs of the case have nothing to do with any one. But I think it 's fair you should know"—the young man's voice was doubly gruff, whether from excess of feeling or

intense reluctance to handle a topic so delicate, she could not tell—"it's fair you should know that on the one and only occasion when my father spoke of this subject to me—the day I came of age, when he explained certain business matters in connection with it—on that occasion he said—that he had much to blame himself for. There, I've said it, because he'd have wished me to say it—and there's an end of it. I don't want ever to have to say it again!"

"It was very generous of you to tell me, Chris," said his sister simply, "because, of course, you must feel about *him* as I do about *her*."

"No, I don't!" said Chris bluntly.

Her astonishment was so great that he was obliged to explain, though he hated explanations.

"Any fellow—that is, any decent fellow—would rather hear his father blamed for anything of that sort than his mother," he said, almost angrily.

May did not understand, but she looked at him with clear innocent eyes and smiled at him gratefully, her heart warmed by the recognition of his loyalty to the mother who had left him.

"I think some one ought to stand up for him, too," she said bravely, "because as Margery says, perhaps —she was hard on him—being very young, and coming, Margery said, of a proud family. But, of course, Margery knows nothing—she was only guessing," added May hastily, "and it was the first, the very first time she ever mentioned the subject to me at all. You see—except you—she is all I have in the world to hold on to—you would n't call *her* an outsider, would you? She loves us—all—so much. And she said—after all they are together now, and whatever it was, depend upon it, they have forgiven each other. And, oh! Chris, Chris, she must have loved

him, though she had been away from home all these years, for though we said nothing to the doctor about it, *we* knew, Margery and I, that it was the news of his death, which she saw in the English papers, that killed her."

She paused, but Chris did not speak, nor move. He seemed to be waiting.

"And she spoke of you, that evening—that perhaps her wandering life was over now, and that she could go home—to her boy," said May in low tones. Though she tried to keep back her tears, one or two splashed down on to the little hands clasped tightly in her lap.

"I 'm glad you 've told me all that!" said Chris presently, in a voice so gentle that she hardly recognised it. "I expect Margery 's right, you know. We 'll leave it at that. Now we understand each other, and I don't think we need ever talk of it any more, do you?"

"No, no! Not now we have spoken of it like that, and agreed that we will never, never blame them—it is not for us to blame them—and never let any one else—only pray that they may be together now, and happy again!" she said in broken childish tones. "And, Chris, I hope you have n't thought me very selfish, for I 've been wrapped up in my own sorrow, and yet you, too, have had to go through the same terrible thing. For I suppose to you he was all that my dear, darling, pretty, bright mamma was to me."

"I don't know about that. What 's the use of making comparisons?" said Christopher hastily. "My father was always awfully decent to me—awfully decent! No fellow ever had a kinder father. But of course a man 's different, and I 've been most of my time at school, and then Oxford——"

He paused, and said rather defiantly:

"I sha'n't go back to the 'Varsity!"—as though he expected his sister to remonstrate.

"Why should you?" she said innocently. "Your education must surely be finished by this time. Mamma left off teaching me at sixteen. She said I knew as much as she did, and spoke French and Italian better; and you are twenty-two!"

Christopher seemed pleased.

"That 's what I said to Anthony. He thought I ought to go back and take my degree. But why should I? It 's not as though I wanted to be a parson, as I told him."

"Who is Anthony?"

"Don't you even know who Anthony is?" said Christopher.

CHAPTER IV

MAY and Christopher climbed slowly up the winding mountain-road, bordered by cherry-trees, through the fir woods.

She stole glances at him, half doubtful, half tender, from time to time.

He looked very British, almost aggressively so, in his grey tweed suit, with black tie and black band about his straw hat, and a briar-wood pipe in his mouth.

But the daylight was less kind to him than the electric lamps of the night before. There was a dulness of eye and a want of clearness in complexion which added to the plainness of blunt features. His expression appeared to be more sullen, and his mouth to be set in a perpetual line of discontent.

Yet May's heart yearned over him, though she had already discovered that his manner left much to be desired, while his abruptness of speech startled her continually, and made her wonder whether she had not unconsciously offended him. Yet through it all her perception told her that he meant kindly towards her; that he was doing his best.

"It is not his fault if he is not accustomed to speak to ladies," she thought, and Margery's tenderly reproachful words rang in her ears:

"Poor little Master Chris. He was only seven years old when we took and left him."

They came out into the brilliant sunshine of the flowering hillside.

Around them, knee-deep, stretched fields of the white narcissus, of ox-eyed daisies, red clover, and blue forget-me-nots, blooming together in the wildest profusion.

"By Jove," said Chris, drawing a long breath.

His sister, wearied with her climb, plunged into the cool depths of the grasses and lay there in restful stillness.

Far below them glittered the turquoise lake. The green hills and valleys crossed and recrossed the landscape, and the mountain peaks above them seemed alluringly near: the snow drifts almost within touch of these flowering meadows.

On the opposite side of the lake, far, far away, stretched the plains, dotted with poplars and châlets: dolls' houses and churches, built patiently by tiny human hands at the foot of those huge hills which sprang so sheer and bald from the green world at their base, rearing their mighty frozen crests against the dazzling blue, whilst clouds whiter than the past winter's slowly melting snow floated below their serene and lofty heights.

On the sloping meadow-land, a thousand feet below, the hay was cut; but up here the wild grasses waved abundantly, bees hummed undisturbed in the fragrant clover, delicate purple harebells quivered in the breath of the mountain air, and the may was yet in bloom.

Spring reigned triumphant on the heights, while summer was slowly climbing the hillsides and resting midway.

The cuckoo's loud note sounded incessantly above the *grillons,* who sang ceaselessly their little song of

earth, as mortals chattering at the gate of the unseen and blind to the Paradise above them.

Oh, sunshine! brilliant on these heights! Oh, breath of heaven! so infinitely pure and clear. Oh, little cities of the plain below!—so remote and small, where dust and smoke and heat and noise still reign on the low level earth, though on the mountains these things may be forgotten.

Christopher kept his grave blue eyes fixed on the fairy flotilla of the lake, which he knew to be white-sailed boats.

"I 've never been to Switzerland before," he said, with an embarrassed laugh, as though ashamed of his own feelings. "I did n't know it was like this."

"*She* could n't keep away from it, she loved it so. Though she knew these altitudes were not very good for her. She would come," said May, and added passionately; "I wish I could stay up here with her for ever! It will be like going back to earth and leaving her in heaven."

Chris sat beside her in silence, but she was again conscious that his silence betokened no want of sympathy. Perhaps he vaguely felt that the beauty and stillness of the surroundings would soothe her grief better than human speech.

Presently he withdrew his gaze from the view and looked down upon the slender form resting beside him. Her oval face was half shadowed by the waving grasses as she gazed upwards into the fathomless blue.

Dragon-flies darted above her in the sunshine, and butterflies fluttered across her face. The blue eyes might have been flowers, they were so still, reflecting the colour of the sky and of the lake below.

Christopher Thorverton realised slowly, since his mind worked slowly, that he had a very pretty sister.

Last night he had not clearly observed how pretty she was. He had only seen that her face was stained and her eyes swollen with weeping. Now he saw also how pure and clear was her colouring; how lovely the curve of her short chin and delicately-cut rose lips; how finely pencilled the light brown eyebrows that met above the blue starry eyes on the bridge of a straight little nose.

A sense of responsibility dawned upon him.

"I say. I wonder what you'll do with yourself at Moreleigh?" he said, almost in dismayed accents.

"Tell me about Moreleigh."

"There's nothing to tell."

"You could tell me what it's like," she urged. "The smallest thing would interest me. You forget I know nothing about it. Margery seems almost afraid to mention it."

"What's Margery been saying?" he asked suspiciously.

"Why, I am telling you! She won't say a word, except that she was engaged to John Youatt once, and she's found out from your man, Cloberry, that he's still single, and she thinks it must be for her sake. Of course that's very romantic, if it's true. But I am more interested in Moreleigh. Is it an old Abbey? Has it been for years and years in our family?"

"Our fiddlesticks!" said Christopher gruffly. "Don't you know we haven't got a family? The Thorverton's are—mushrooms, interlopers, all that kind of thing. It is the Denys family who've always lived at the Abbey till my father bought it."

"Denys was mamma's name."

"Of course. She was one of them. But it's Anthony who ought to have the Abbey—would have, if

his grandfather and his uncle had n't cut off the entail."

Her face fell.

"Anthony again! Her brother?"

"Her cousin, and a distant one at that; but the head of the family—Denys of Moreleigh."

"And is he very bitter about it?" said May breathlessly. "How old is he? What 's he like?"

"Bitter? Why on earth should he be bitter? He 's the last man in the world. He likes the Manor House just as well. So would I. Less bother. And he 's the best-looking man in the country. Every one says so. Though he ain't so young as he was, of course—getting on in life. Cleverest chap I ever saw!"

This was a long sentence for Christopher, and he refreshed himself by nibbling the stalks of freshly-pulled grass for some time in silence.

"Margery says the West Country is beautiful, and I 've read about it—in lots of books," said May. "Is it like this?"

"I 'm no great hand at description," said Chris, almost unnecessarily, "but I should say that, in its way, it 's quite as—quite as"—he searched his limited vocabulary for a word—"as decent as this place is with regard to views and hills and wild flowers on a much smaller scale. I think that 's about the nearest I could get. On a very much smaller scale, mind you. Still, if you like this so much, I expect you 'll like that. Only, of course, I don't know what sort of a life you 're accustomed to. I don't suppose Moreleigh 's what you 'd call a gay place, though there 's plenty of cricket and that sort of thing in summer, and good hunting."

"I can tell you all about our life in a moment," said May, who was not gifted with any of the limi-

tations of speech which distinguished her brother. "Mamma and I have generally taken a furnished apartment—we have one now at Vincennes, just outside Paris, you know, to keep our things in, and as a kind of *pied-à-terre,* and settled down there wherever it was—Rome or Paris or Florence, for the winter. And in summer-time, we have always wandered about looking for beautiful places where she could sketch."

"Like Anthony," said Chris.

"Does he wander about?"

"Of course not. He 's too much sense. He stays at home. But he sketches."

May shrank from the roughness of his tone, but she said to herself: "He does not mean it," and aloud: "Surely he must suffer from the want of variety in his subjects?"

"Oh, lord! I know nothing about that. He only does it to pass the time, for amusement."

"Mamma worked! It was n't amusement. Though, of course, it was delightful work!" cried May. "Surely, surely you must have heard of her painting!"

Christopher was obliged to confess that he never had, but he tried to soften the confession by adding that he knew nothing about art, and cared less.

By this time May was growing accustomed to his manner, but she was surprised and almost compassionate that he should be ignorant of her mother's successes, for Mrs. Thorverton had made a quite distinct reputation for herself, and her exquisitely-finished water-colour landscapes had found their way into the galleries of several European capitals, and commanded a price which had gone far to supplement her slender income.

Though May had not inherited her talent, she had

shared all the pleasure and interest of these small triumphs. Her existence had been a singularly cloudless one. Despite the silence Mrs. Thorverton had maintained about her earlier life, it had never been possible for May to think of her as an unhappy woman, she had regarded her always, on the contrary, as a delightful being, gifted with wonderful powers and unceasing energy.

Whatever regrets Mrs. Thorverton might indulge in secret, she had had the strength of mind to hide them from her child. It was, besides, certain that the wandering life into which she had drifted suited her disposition and her tastes.

May could not recall any words or looks of despondency. She saw her mother playful, humorous, enthusiastic or tender, quickly moved to pleasure or to indignation, to smiles or tears; decided in her opinions, but light and graceful in her expression of them; a being endowed with infinite tact and cheerfulness; but the last person in the world with whom any one would have associated tragedy. Yet tragedy was doubtless present, though merged in the commonplace of every day which goes to make up the sum of human life.

As May tried to put into words the recollections of that pleasant, wandering, careless existence, she began to realise the more acutely that it was now over for ever. She recounted, very simply and touchingly, how from the time she had been quite a little girl, it had been her greatest delight to take the cares of housekeeping off her mother's shoulders.

"Mamma was an artist, and so unfitted for anything of that kind. What could you expect of a genius?"

She dwelt with pride on her own proficiency in

marketing, a duty Margery had never been able to fulfil, since in fourteen years she had not acquired even a smattering of any language but her own.

"And, of course, her cooking is very English. As mamma said, she had no ideas beyond watery potatoes and greasy joints. But me—I have a gift for the *ménage*, which is a comfort, since I am not artistic," said May humbly; "and we have had such nice *bonnes-à-tout-faire*, who have taught me to cook well. For French cooking is always the best in the end."

Christopher—who, like all true-born Britishers, secretly distrusted artistic people, and had a sincere admiration for women who avowed themselves interested in housekeeping—listened with some respect to these details.

"I 'm jolly glad you don't go in for art," he said, with an air of relief, "though, of course, I know people who do are very clever, and all that sort of thing. You 'll be able to keep house for me at the Abbey, and that will give you something to do."

"I could teach your servants to cook," said May doubtfully, "if they cared to learn. But I suppose you have a good many?"

"A good few," said Chris; "too many, I expect Mrs. Foss, the housekeeper, is supposed to look after them, but Cloberry does a lot in that way, too. He saves no end of bother. But you can teach them anything you like," he added hastily; "engage a French *chef* if you choose. Only I warn you I shall always want plain English meals for myself."

"I know—'*Rosbif à l'Anglaise*,' the great joints they wheel about in the Paris restaurants!"—she shuddered. "Of course, I shall see you have what you like," she added with dignity. "I know men care more about food than we do. Old M. Cloquet, my

dancing-master, told me quite seriously that, since his only daughter died, his dinner was his greatest earthly pleasure."

"I hope I 'm not so greedy as that," said Chris. His tone was rather cross, but the crossness became dismay. "Why, what on earth 's the matter?"

For May turned suddenly from him, and lay face downwards in the grass, sobbing audibly and bitterly.

"What is it? I say! Don't!" he implored, divided between embarrassment and a pity he knew not how to express. "It does n't do any good, you know. Look here, shall I fetch Margery, or somebody?"

"No, no, no!" sobbed May. "What good could anybody do? It is only—oh! how could I—how could I—talk and chatter like this while she— Oh! mamma, mamma, I want her so—I want her so!"

Later in the same day May sat in the balcony of the sitting-room, waiting for the summons to the funicular which was to take them down the mountain-side.

Margery had finished her packing much earlier, and Cloberry had taken charge of the luggage.

May found with astonishment that Christopher did not attempt to concern himself with a single detail of the coming journey.

Cloberry had the tickets; Cloberry paid the hotel bill; and Cloberry informed them of the hours at which they were to dine and start.

Such farewells as May had to make were soon made, and such presents as she had wished to give she had given shyly and in secret. Alone, she made her last sad pilgrimage to the mountain cemetery, where a sympathetic *sacristain* met her and showed that he had covered the new-made grave with spring flowers.

A gentleman had been there, the brother of mademoiselle, who had been generous; and she would perceive that he, though but a poor man, had tried to be generous in his turn.

These flowers were from his own garden, and this beautiful beaded wreath in a glass case was a token of sympathy from his wife. Mademoiselle might rest assured that he would care for the grave.

"Until I come again?"

"But, yes, mademoiselle. That will be soon?"

"Oh, very, very soon!" said the poor little mourner, weeping.

The *sacristain* thought he knew better. He had asked that question of many devoted relatives who had laid their dead to sleep beneath the wind-swept mountain grass, and always they said they would return.

But the years passed away. . . .

"It is nature. If one grieved always as at first, could one continue to live?" he said, shrugging his shoulders.

Nevertheless, he was compassionate of the sorrow of the fair English girl, and considerately left her to kneel alone beside the flower-heaped mound, whilst he warned away other visitors.

"*C'est sa mère, pauvre enfant.*"

May whispered her farewells and her last messages to her mother, forgetting, for a space of time, everything except that all that was left of the being she loved best in the world rested beside her in the seeming solitude of that mountain graveyard.

Her tears relieved her, and the little broken words she sobbed forth, as though her mother could still hear her and understand, comforted her childish soul.

As she laid her lips upon the turf above her sacred

dead, and whispered her last good-bye, she added a piteous promise to take care of Chris.

"You 'll never go home to your boy now, darling, as you said you would, but I shall be there. I 'll take care of him for you and try and make him more what you would have liked him to be, for, oh! I 'm afraid you would have been disappointed. But I 'll do what I can to take your place and help him to be more like you," she sobbed; "I can't think of anything else to do for you, darling, but I 'll do that with all my heart, and somewhere—oh! somewhere, I know you 'll be helping and blessing your little girl who loves you so."

She returned to the hotel and found all ready for their departure, and that Chris had had a little dinner carried up to the sitting-room for her; but she could not eat.

She sat on the balcony and looked out upon the now familiar view for the last time.

It was a still evening, as of an early English spring.

In the empty and silent garden a heavily-laden laburnum hung motionless,—perfect bunches of golden blossom against a background of purple distance; the red of the *aubépine* and snow of may-blossom, the large, pure petals of the single pæonies, white and rose, and the delicate bloom of the lilac and waxen flower of the chestnut, were all brilliantly visible in the gathering dusk.

The sky showed an orange sea of glory, with floating islands of blue vapour, above the pearly grey and dim violet of distant hills.

The opposite mountains, mysterious, intangible, melting into mist, were reflected in the glassy waters of the motionless lake.

Christopher came up from the *table d'hôte* dinner and joined her, cigarette in hand.

He did not speak of what lay nearest her heart, and she was thankful, recognising the delicacy of his reserve, and unaware that it was his habitual attitude towards the world in general.

His very presence in some measure comforted her; though he might be sullen, there was something of solid strength about him that inspired her with confidence. She was so young, and the sense of forlornness before his advent had added a kind of terror to her grief.

Margery was a good soul and a faithful, but she had always been subject to authority, and, now that her mistress was gone, rather dependent upon May than able to afford her support.

The summons came at last, and the brother and sister passed through a little group of bowing and reverential servants, whose unusual deference May innocently ascribed to compassion for her bereavement, rather than to the liberality of the careless, wealthy young Englishman, which had exceeded the wildest dreams of all concerned in the arrangements entailed by Mrs. Thorverton's sudden death.

The wife of the proprietor stepped forward, and silently placed a bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley in May's hand. She was a motherly soul, and had been kind in the moment of need, and May lifted her black veil, and kissed and thanked her with her natural simplicity, amid a murmur of sympathy; but Christopher strode on with British impassiveness, looking neither to the right nor to the left.

It was a relief to him to find himself and his belongings all safely bestowed in the funicular railway carriage, sliding down the mountainside, through the

deep fir woods clad in their emerald summer growth, and the lighter foliage of the cherry-trees fringing the precipitous way which was to land them all once more in the work-a-day world of the lower levels.

CHAPTER V

FROM the windows of the little flat at Vincennes May looked out upon the grey stone buildings of the Caserne, with it grass ramparts and enclosures.

It was Sunday, and though it was very early, a portion of the suburban population of Paris was already astir.

A woman in a red flannel petticoat and a grey jacket was shaking a duster over the adjacent balcony. A soldier, red-capped and red-trousered, with blue surtout, hurried past; and a workman in a washed-out blue linen blouse, with his hands in his pockets, sauntered across to the little grocer's shop which was immediately beneath her window, and stood staring at the goods displayed on a low table outside it.

The electric tram which ran past the corner of the street chimed little gongs, and stopped to take up early passengers.

Round the grey-tinted walls hung a number of water-colours,—Italian gardens and terraces, French vineyards and flower markets, little landscapes and sea-pieces,—all unmistakably by the same hand, and all remarkable for that exquisite clearness and brightness of colour and finish.

A big empty easel was put away in a corner, and a great portfolio of sketches leant against it. Beneath the window stood a solid writing-table, with a sloping desk.

In the centre of the room was a small round table covered with a white cloth, whereon was placed a basin of steaming *café au lait* and half a yard of *pain de ménage.*

The owner of the apartment had brought this early *déjeuner* for her young tenant, with her own hands, and was now in broken English condoling with Margery in the bedroom; assisting her to unpack poor Mrs. Thorverton's pretty dresses and expensive hats, which would never be wanted any more.

May ate and drank what she could, to please the provider of her frugal meal, and then went to the writing-table and addressed herself, nervously and tearfully, to the task of going through her mother's papers, lest she had left among them any directions, or expression of her last wishes.

But there was nothing. Nothing but files of receipted bills, neatly tied up by May's own dexterous fingers, and various correspondences relating to the disposal of her mother's drawings, and press-cuttings, wherein her exhibited work had received its modicum of praise and blame.

And a little casket which May had seen a hundred times, containing the miniatures of her mother's parents, and their parents, and a small yellow packet of her great-grandfather's love-letters, which had somehow been preserved as curiosities of diction and elegance, from the first in which this dead-and-gone Denys of Moreleigh implored his "fervently adored Charlotte's" forgiveness for his extraordinary temerity in thus addressing her, to the last in which he declared himself "all impatience to lead her to the altar this day sen'night."

All record of Elizabeth Thorverton's married life seemed blotted out. Nothing relating to it was to be

found. Of stern and steady purpose it seemed that she must have put it all aside, and resolved to start afresh, and live an entirely new life. Perhaps the silence appealed more to May than any explanations that could have been written.

It was as though she were mutely entreated by the dead to let the dead past rest in its grave with her; to think of her only as she had known her—as the devoted, tender mother who had no interest in life beyond her child and her work; who had been her playfellow, her nurse, her teacher, and her dearest comrade ever since she could remember; whose days had been filled with harmlessness: with honest work and humble prayer and innocent amusement; with the worship of God and of Nature, and of all that was beautiful or inspiring in the works of man.

"There is nothing—no record of any kind—no expression of any wish," said May to Christopher, when he arrived, according to agreement, to fetch her to luncheon at his hotel. "But she knew I would always know by instinct what she would wish. There would be no need for her to write anything down. I was her other self; we were one. And, oh, Chris! I have a letter from her lawyer, Mr. Gethell, in answer to the one I wrote—a letter from London. Would you mind reading it?"

Chris sighed and put down the cigarette he was smoking. He hated business sincerely.

"Well, it's quite plain. Don't you understand it?"

"It seems I am to have all poor mamma's money," she said timidly.

"That's right. Why shouldn't you? I'm afraid it's not very much."

"It's over three hundred a year," said May, rather proudly. "I know all about it. It used to be more,

but the value of her securities has diminished. She explained it to me."

"By Jove!" he said suddenly. "Is that all that you and she had to live on all these years?"

"No, no, indeed. There were the cheques."

"What cheques?"

"That she got for her pictures," explained May. "Often they came most conveniently when our balance was very low, or even overdrawn—for mamma was a little inclined to be extravagant over our clothes. It was her only fault, and such a nice one that I loved her all the more for it. She loved pretty things so much. It used to be quite difficult sometimes to get her past the shops in Paris," said May, with a little, tender smile of recollection; but Christopher frowned.

"I don't like to think that you—and she—had n't everything you wanted," he said; "that you had to work."

"Oh, Chris! but we had everything we wanted. Don't you understand that half the fun was—wanting it? And what would life be without work? It was work that was everything in the world to her!" cried May. "I was thinking, that last evening in Switzerland, what a charming study she would have made from the balcony where we were sitting; that dusky rose sky, and the vivid colours of the pæonies on the rocks. I go on choosing subjects all the time, though she will never paint them any more," she said, with a smothered sob. Then she took up the letter listlessly. "There is some other money he speaks of. It was that which I did not understand."

"That is to do with the settlement my father made on her at the time of her marriage. The surviving parent was to have what they call power of appoint-

ment over it. But as neither of them exercised it the money is divided between us. The trustees will pay you the interest on your share till you come of age, and then you get your capital, and, of course, I get my share of the capital now."

"I don't think I ought to take half that unless you share mamma's money with me," said May timidly. Christopher smoked, and considered. "Don't you agree with me?"

"I see your point," he said kindly; "but, you see, you can't help it. It's business, and it was arranged so."

"Can't I give you half?"

Christopher turned rather red.

"My father's money all comes to me—and the Abbey and everything," he said, in somewhat embarrassed tones.

"Naturally it does. You are the boy," said May, flushing rather proudly.

"Well, that's enough," he said gruffly. "In point of fact, some people might think it too much. But, as you say, of course I'm the right person to succeed my father, and it's up to me to provide properly for my sister, not as a favour, mind you," he added, with rough delicacy, "but as your right. Meantime old Gethell will pay you the interest on your own money till you come of age, and when it's not enough you can ask me for more. Now, would you mind not talking business any more; I hate it!"

May had already discovered that Christopher hated all subjects that made him uncomfortable; and that sentiment and business alike had this effect upon him.

In order to change the topic of conversation more effectually he walked round the studio and looked at the brilliant water-colours on the grey walls, uttering

from time to time as he looked, his favourite exclamations of astonishment and admiration alternately.

"I say! By Jove!"

"These were not even the best. They were the ones that did not sell," said May simply. "We have dozens more in the portfolio. What shall I do with them, Chris? Shall I bring them all to England? Would there be room at Moreleigh?"

"Room!" he laughed. "There are whole galleries empty. These would be lost in them. Old Sir Anthony took the pick of his family portraits to the Manor House when my father bought the Abbey and its contents, though he left all the other pictures where they hung." Then his tone changed. "I expect you'd best hang them in your own rooms, May—you'll like that best, and you'll want to take them away when you—when you marry"; and in answer to her little start and flush of embarrassment, he added hastily: "But of course you'll do what you like. Keep on this flat for them if you'd rather. In case you ever felt inclined to run over for a bit of a change, you might find it handy, though it's a trifle out of the way for the amusing parts of Paris."

"Oh, Chris! you are very kind," said May, and ventured, very shyly, to kiss him.

It was the first caress that had passed between them, and Christopher coloured; but not only did he endure it with comparative graciousness, but thereafter held out his cleanshaven cheek regularly when she bade him good-night or good-morning, as a fraternal sign that she might repeat the salute if she felt inclined, to which May always dutifully responded.

She elected not to keep on the flat; and all the difficulties she foresaw in packing the water-colours safely in their glass and gilded frames were overcome by the

single word "Maple," breathed respectfully by Cloberry, to whom, as usual, his master turned for advice.

"To be sure, they have a branch over here. Careful? Good Lord, they're experts. I say! As if you and Margery could pack as well as they could. They'll take charge of everything here and deliver it at Moreleigh. Tell Margery not to bother any more about packing anything beyond what you need."

"It certainly saves one a great deal of trouble to be rich," said May thoughtfully.

Afterwards she said to Margery: "My brother is very kind to me."

"Aye, my darling, you're right enough to luke on the bright side!" said Margery mournfully. "'T is a gude thing as he've tuke to you, Miss May. Yu must try and be mother and sister arl in one to him, for by arl accounts he needs a deal of luking after, and his poor papa were not the man to do it. Vamous tales I du hear of the goings on at the Abbey, and poor Mrs. Foss, as was housekeeper in your mamma's time, like tu go out of her mind with the ways; they'd hoped the place would be cleared out and started fresh when the old master died, but Cloberry says Mr. Christopher won't take no trouble, and it's yu they'll be luking to."

"What has Cloberry been saying?"

"He's only had the leastest bit of a tell with me," said Margery, alarmed. "Enough tu make it plain 't is time there was a lady at the Abbey tu keep things going till Master Christopher finds a wife. For Cloberry says he be no more fit to look after things than the babe unbarn. Just a spoilt boy, with his temper and arl, as none of them dare n't cross for a moment."

"I have n't seen a sign of his having a temper," said

May indignantly. Then bethinking herself: "Perhaps he is a little impatient—as though he were used for every one to give way to him."

"Oh, my dear! would he show his temper tu such as yu, and your poor mamma not cold in her grave? But there 's no doubt he 've a good heart at the bottom of it all," said Margery in subdued tones. "He used to fly into passions, but he arlways had a good heart and an open hand, my little Master Chris. And Cloberry says he must be terrible set on yu to be so gentle, and thinking arl the time what 's to be done for yu. Yu may depend on 't, Miss May, 't is for that you 've been brart together again, for yu to get hold on him, and keep him from back-sliding."

"I wonder if I ought to try and persuade him to go back to Oxford again," said May anxiously. "He said Anthony thought he ought to."

"Not for nothing in this world!" cried Margery. "Cloberry says he was in with the worst of them up along tu Oxford, and brart home the fastest of the fast, smoking and drinking and playing of cards half the night. Doan't 'ee zay a word about it, Miss May, but just lay yourself out to make home pleasant for the poor bye, as the old master was shut up from marn till night by arl accounts, and no wonder Master Christopher took tu bad ways. But yu must stiffle your own feelings, Miss May, and, howsoever yu feel, not be always moping and mumping, but git some nice pretty young ladies round and make it cheerful for him and yu, zame as yure poor mamma wude have wished 'ee tu du."

"Yes, she said one must be always cheerful; but it is very hard to be cheerful when one's heart is broken!" said May sorrowfully.

"But 't is duty none the less, and yu must think

of him as we 've been away from so long, poor bye!" entreated Margery.

"I do think of him," said May.

During the days that followed she went to the shops in Paris where her mother was best known, and ordered her mourning, and Christopher bade her buy besides whatever she chose and send in the bills to him. May shook her head, smiling; she was not to be cured so quickly of her habits of thrift and self-denial.

Thereupon, after anxious consultation with Margery, he went out by himself and bought her an immense dressing-bag, so heavy that she could not lift it, and filled with gold and tortoise-shell fittings that it took her half a day to examine.

May was too practical to approve the purchase, too loving not to be grateful for it, and too young not to admire the munificence and splendour of the gift; and Chris was so pleased with her pleasure that he determined to buy her another present on the very first opportunity that should offer.

Considerate of her desire for quiet, he allowed her to remain in her flat, but insisted upon entertaining her regularly at meals in his hotel.

"You don't get proper substantial luncheons and dinners in these rooms of yours," he said gravely, "and it 's my business to see that you don't make yourself ill." May did not like to explain that she was not accustomed to heavy meals, and that she was sure that if anything could make her ill it would be that she should eat and drink as much as he did.

She was secretly alarmed at his extravagance, and dismayed by the amount of whiskey-and-soda he consumed and the number of cigarettes which he smoked; but she could not help being also touched and elated by the consideration he displayed for her.

He had the most elaborate meals brought up to a private sitting-room in his hotel, in the Champs Elysées, that she might not be obliged to face strangers in the restaurant below, though he greatly preferred dining there himself; and at night there was always a motor brougham, with Cloberry in attendance, to take her back to Vincennes.

Christopher's manners might be uncouth, but his determination to take care of his sister was obviously fixed, and though he gruffly announced his hatred of Paris and hotel life generally the day after their arrival, yet he had also intimated his willingness to endure it as long as she chose.

But poor May, though she clung to the associations of the flat at Vincennes, found very little rest or consolation therein.

She was out and about and fully occupied during the daytime; but her dreams were full of the horrors engendered by shock and sorrow combined. Over and over again, in the hours of darkness, as she lay, half waking, half sleeping, in the little dressing-room adjoining the room which had been her mother's, she lived through the event of the past days.

The roar of express trains sounded in her ears, with the incessant chirping of the crickets in the long grasses of the mountain graveyard. She lived again through the terror of that moment when Margery's scream brought her, running, in white nightgown and tumbled hair, to the bedside, where lay that cold, smiling face, her mother's face, but indescribably changed.

Again the Swiss doctor chattered volubly, unmindful, as it seemed to her in her anguish, of the awfulness of the presence in the next room. Again she was

pleading wildly with a compassionate but inexorable official, who, with the doctor on one hand and the landlord on the other, tried to explain to her that the law was the law, and that she must submit to the immediate removal of her dead to the mortuary. It was the landlady whose coaxing convinced the poor child better than any arguments. She led her to the little mortuary in that quiet cemetery, and, bidding her shut her eyes as they passed through the outer chamber, where lay many open coffins, showed her a little inner chapel which could be made beautiful with flowers; where she and Margery could come and be alone with their dead when they wished, away from the noise of the hotel, and the coming and going of visitors, and the music of the band.

But in her dreams the mortuary became a centre of horror to May. Nightly she imagined herself imprisoned there, and escaping only to fly wildly down the steep precipice of the funicular railway track, through dark fir woods, where a coldly smiling, unfamiliar, yet beloved face shone through the foliage like a strange moon.

The journey to England was made on a warm, showery, summer day, and though the magnificent dressing-bag occupied a state cabin and the whole of Margery's attention throughout the crossing, its owner remained on deck, enjoying the fresh breeze and the brightness of blue sky and blue sea, and white foam scattered.

The first landing in her native country was disappointing, as such a landing must be under the miserable prevailing conditions, when unfortunate travellers are hustled over slippery gangways on to wet stones, and driven through crowds of spectators, along muddy

and unsheltered ways into antiquated and overcrowded railway carriages.

But the rural prettiness of the Kentish landscape almost atoned for the shaking of the express; and the first impressions of London for all; because, May told her brother, it was such a relief to find it was not nearly so dismal and foggy as she had been led to expect.

They spent the night at the Ritz Hotel, and on the following morning started for the west of England and home.

CHAPTER VI

OLD Lady Denys had never entered the Abbey since the day when the late Christopher Thorverton became its owner.

She had superintended the removal of the more valuable of the household gods to the Manor House, and occupied herself there by placing them to advantage in the low and narrow rooms which would now be her principal abode until she exchanged them for a yet narrower dwelling.

She was always a picturesque and dignified figure, and she saw to it that her surroundings formed a suitable setting for her own remarkable personality.

The Manor House lent itself to her efforts; it was everywhere panelled with oak, and great beams crossed and recrossed the low ceilings. Broad, polished steps, crooked with age, led through the doorways up or down to the different levels of the black, uneven, waxed floor.

The shallow staircase—full of odd nooks and angles, and wide window-seats, and curiously shaped landings—was ornamented in every available space with great blue vases and flat dishes of *pot-pourri*. The stairs led to a square portrait gallery, whence opened the doors of a perfect warren of small intercommunicating sleeping-rooms, which lay close under the steep, sloping roof, with its sheltering eaves above diamond-paned windows.

Lady Denys was now nearly eighty years old, and

crippled by a rheumatic affection of one knee, which made walking always painful and sometimes impossible.

But unimpaired energy of spirit shone from the keen, hazel eyes, that were so like and yet so unlike those of her son. For from Anthony's eyes looked forth a perpetual gentleness and calm; and from hers an eternal fiery discontent, which expressed itself no less in the lines of her sunken but beautifully-shaped mouth, and the deep furrow that had ploughed itself between her arched eyebrows.

Her complexion was of waxen clearness, and her white hair was elaborately rolled and puffed above her brow, which gave her a striking and modish air in keeping with the carefully studied picturesqueness of her appearance.

She wore invariably flowered muslin or foulard gowns, home-made, but always dainty and fresh, softened by old lace, and gay with ribbons of tender rose or lavender shades.

Her frail fingers bore heavy burdens of flashing rings, but they were nevertheless constantly busied with her needle.

Lady Denys was proud of her small hands, of her industry, of her wonderful eyesight, and the fact that age had scarcely bowed her once slender and beautiful figure.

She sat habitually bolt upright in a straight-backed elbow-chair beside the window of the sitting-room, which had been her home for upwards of a quarter of a century.

By her side stood a rosewood eighteenth-century work-table, fitted with gilt and ivory implements, and with a shelf for her favourite books; and before her reposed an exquisitely worked stool, upon which

one little foot constantly rested, in a high-heeled, black satin shoe and a white silk stocking.

The Banksia roses clustered round this favourite window, and nodded in upon her as she worked, and on summer evenings the song of the nightingale from the surrounding woods sounded above the murmur of the waterfall.

Both formed only the accompaniment of the long, long thoughts which filled the empty days for Lady Denys, whose fingers were busied mechanically over her work, while her heart and brain took no heed of it.

The song of the waterfall, low in summer and loud and insistent in winter, lulled her to sleep and welcomed her to waking earth. At first it had troubled her, but she grew accustomed to it, and now she would have missed it sadly; it seemed so much less noisy than formerly, even when swelled by the rain; or was it only that she did not hear so well?

Though she was so old, the monotony of her life maddened Lady Denys still.

All her days, until the change in her husband's fortunes befell, she had enjoyed the society of many friends, the pleasures of travel, and constant gaiety at home and abroad. When her husband inherited the heavily involved estates of Moreleigh she had reconciled herself to the comparative exile of residence at the Abbey by filling it with company.

Sir Anthony had always been extravagant, and now his expenditure became reckless, for he was bent upon improving and restoring the beloved home of his fathers.

He had never chosen to discuss business with his wife, and she was quite ignorant of the true state of his affairs, so that the necessity which presently

arose for letting the Abbey came upon her as a painful and altogether unexpected shock.

Even then, and though she began to perceive that her husband was quite unfitted to cope with the financial difficulties which beset him, her spirit did not fail.

She cut off all her personal expenses, and urged him to set to work and build up anew his fallen fortunes.

But the General was too old and too simple. His life's work, as he understood it, was over, and he had neither aptitude nor spirit for business.

After one wild effort to retrieve his ruin by a mad speculation, he bent his white head to the storm, and resigned himself to perpetual retirement and economy in the earliest home of his race.

His wife concealed her disappointment as well as she could, consoled him tenderly, and tended him faithfully until he passed quietly out of existence; the ambition she had perforce to resign for her husband she fastened upon the son who had been born to them comparatively late in life.

But Anthony's personality was not less marked than her own; and she could not instil into him one spark of her ambition, nor of her fiery energy.

He had inherited her firm will and his father's gentle manner, and the combination proved invincible.

Such talents as he possessed appeared to be concentrated in his finger-tips.

He could build a shed or make a violin, and he was never idle for a moment. His perseverance enabled him to excel in a variety of useful and ornamental accomplishments, but it was never brought to bear upon the art of money-making.

His mother raged and wept in secret, torn between love and disappointment.

She was grateful for his devotion, but she would have been more grateful if he had neglected her in pursuit of his own interests.

Other mothers, calling upon Lady Denys, lamented the absence of beloved sons, out in the world fighting their way, or risking their lives in far countries; and contrasted their own lot with her good fortune in having her son constantly by her side; and a son so contented, so devoted, and so beloved in that little corner of the earth which was his own manor.

But Lady Denys, listening and nodding, felt through all the congratulations a note of wonder; and mortification wrung her soul. She knew that Anthony's contented tarrying at Moreleligh was due less to his affection for her than to his own lack of enterprise.

His perception of her discontent embarrassed him, and made him even less companionable than the pre-occupation of his multifarious small interests necessitated.

His mother did not, in truth, find him companionable at all. She loved books and the discussion of abstract subjects, which Anthony, who preferred the concrete and had no literary tastes, cared for not at all; and even had he been interested in either, he would not have been able to talk of them, for he was a man of few words.

On the other hand, Christopher Thorverton declared that he knew no one in the world so companionable as Anthony. Perhaps he respected no one in the world as he respected Mr. Denys of Moreleigh, whose good opinion he desired now as secretly he had desired it as a little boy. In his cousin's presence the temper which other people declared to be unbearable was never provoked. It was one of Anthony's character-

istics that he never found fault and never gave advice unless he was asked for it.

Old Lady Denys, on the contrary, found fault with Christopher whenever she saw him, which was not very often; and would have advised him from morning till night, had he given her the opportunity; and he hated her roundly in consequence.

Nevertheless, he conducted May across the park to call at the Manor House on the very afternoon of her arrival at Moreleigh.

"If you are not tired, and you say you're not," he urged, "you'd best come at once and see old Cousin Rosabelle and get it over. Of course, it's a beastly nuisance, but it must be done. And she's fearfully touchy. If you put it off she'll very likely be offended. She's always more or less got the hump with me, but it wouldn't do for her to get it with you. And, besides, you'll see Anthony, and he's no end of a good sort."

"It's not a beastly nuisance at all, and I want to see them both very much!" said May.

But she was exceedingly nervous as Christopher lifted the latch of the green door in the cob wall, and led her through the old-fashioned flower-garden into the oak parlour, where old Lady Denys sat in state.

The nervousness lasted only as long as Christopher made a third at the interview, perched awkwardly in the window-seat, swinging one boot to and fro close to the old lady's stool, and occasionally kicking it and begging her pardon. He also showed a lamentable inclination to whistle, which Lady Denys checked by darting a fiery glance at his pursed-up mouth.

Presently he departed in search of Anthony, with a muttered remark that he would bring him in to see May; and as he shut the door with unnecessary

force behind him Lady Denys held out her hand to May with a wistful look in her dark sunken eyes, and invited her to take the low chair beside her own.

"He may look for Anthony as much as he likes. If it were the Queen of Sheba arriving instead of a pretty cousin, Anthony would not leave his workshop a fraction of a second earlier than usual. He will come up for tea as the clock strikes five, and not an instant sooner," said Lady Denys. "Ah, my dear, it is time a bright, fresh personality like yours should appear among us!"

"Oh, Cousin Rosabelle! how can I be bright now that I have lost mamma?" said May, kissing the old ringed hand sorrowfully. "I must always be sad as long as I live without her!"

The old lady looked silently at the fair oval face against the black drapery of the deep French mourning veil, and nodded slowly.

She knew that presently May would be sad no longer, but she was none the less compassionate.

"You shall tell me all about it later," she said tenderly. "Not now, for you would not like Anthony when he comes in to find you crying—to find us both crying. For your mother was very dear to me, little May, and I think you will be dear to me, too, since you are very like her, and she was one of those who understand."

"Yes, mamma always understood," said May, and she kissed the soft hand that held her own once more, and felt a little less forlorn and less a stranger.

"She and I were kindred spirits. She was full of life and energy and enthusiasm. But she married, and was lost to us, and it was all unhappy. It must have been a long time ago, now I look at you; but to me it is as though it all happened yesterday, and

when I saw you come in, little May—one of us—and not like Chris, who is all Thorverton—it was as though her spirit looked at me out of your pretty blue eyes —full of courage and sweetness and yet hoping for a welcome. And my heart welcomed you, my darling, in that moment, and all my hopes sprang up afresh, as they did when I saw her, long ago. Though I am a fool to hope for anything at my age."

"No, no, dear Cousin Rosabelle. If one had no hope one could n't live at all. It is only the hope of seeing mamma again that keeps me alive, I think," said May simply.

Lady Denys looked keenly into the candid eyes that met her own. She saw that May was simple and loyal and sincere. It is difficult for a young woman to deceive an old one on such points.

"I have had no one to speak my thoughts to for a long, long time," said the old lady, half to herself. "One cannot talk to outsiders. Yet I get very tired, —very, very tired of the silence; of looking at the furniture all day and hearing the clock tick. Even the humming of the bees in the sunshine is only pleasant when one is full of happy dreams and hopes. It saddens me now, everything saddens me, and memory is the saddest thing of all."

She burst suddenly and pitifully into wild weeping, the strange, unaccustomed weeping of age, and May, bewildered, feeling that this was a grief she could not understand and might not share, put her arms about the upright figure in the stiff-backed chair, and embraced the old lady as she had been wont to embrace her mother, begging her to be comforted.

"Yes, I shall be comforted, and it is borne in upon me that it is you who will comfort me," said Lady Denys, nodding. "Now I said we were not to cry, and

here am I behaving like an old fool, and you with your pretty blue eyes full of tears—and, oh, so like her!"

"But mamma never cried," said May.

"Did she not? In her youth she was a creature of tears as well as smiles. And I cannot think of her except as young and pretty. But the years fly by and bring their changes."

"She was young and pretty always. She could never be anything else!" cried the loyal little daughter in unsteady tones. "Always full of courage and ready to laugh when things went wrong, and working, working so happily all the time. She was always light-hearted; it was I who was the serious one. And wherever we went the poor people loved her. In Italy they used to say she had the face of a Madonna; it is true she was an angel. Often and often when she came to kiss me good-night she used to whisper to me that nothing else in the whole world was worth while but being good."

Lady Denys was silent for a long while.

Then she roused herself, perceiving suddenly that May looked pale and tired.

"My dear, I am forgetting you have just come off a long journey. You must be wanting your tea. I will ring for Youatt, and while he is bringing it, you shall come up-stairs with me and see your dear mother's room. It is kept just as it used to be, and I have never let any one else occupy it, but it is yours whenever you will, for I am none so sure that you will be able to live with your brother for ever. Give me my stick, my love, and your arm, if you will, for I am so stiff nowadays that I walk upstairs with difficulty."

Christopher meanwhile found Anthony in his workshop, as he knew he should find him at this hour.

The lord of the Manor was standing before his work-table, absorbed in the planing of a half-inch board. The sun shone through the skylight directly over his work, upon his white shirt-sleeves, tipping his uncovered hair with silver, and illumining the shavings which curled away under his shapely busy hands.

Christopher, smoking his favourite pipe, sat upon the carpenter's bench beside the glue-pot, which his cousin had just lifted from the stove.

He always found conversation with Anthony easy and pleasant, for Mr. Denys never interrupted and rarely answered him; and this reticence enabled Christopher to collect his thoughts, and say what he really wanted to say, which he seldom managed to do in other company.

"I have been thinking a good deal about—my sister."

It was a luxury of Anthony's workshop that the smoked-out pipe might be tapped on the heel of the boot and its ashes emptied on to the floor without apology.

When Anthony had finished work, his final act was always to sweep with a soft broom the stone flags which paved it. The heap of dust and shavings under the table, with its solid, boarded back, grew to mighty proportions before he attacked that in turn, and carried it solemnly in an immense basket to feed a bonfire in the yard.

"I 've been thinking," said Christopher, refilling the pipe, "and it seems to me it would be pleasanter for May if there were another lady in the house."

The board was now of satin smoothness. Anthony ran his fingers over the surface, and held it up edgeways and examined it; then selecting a small handsaw, he proceeded to measure it carefully and cut it into lengths.

"You see she's rather young to live practically alone with men, and that's what it amounts to. I can't turn Sandry out; he's got into the habit of living in the house in my father's time, and he'll save me a lot of trouble. I know the people don't like him much, but they wouldn't like any one in Sandry's position. It must be a beastly nuisance to be any one's agent. I've always found him a good chap, and my father trusted him. Besides," he added conclusively, "he's far and away the best bat we've got, and I must have some one who takes an interest in cricket. I suppose, by the bye, there's nothing to prevent me from playing cricket and so on this summer in spite of—what's happened? You see, of course, I'm down for heaps of matches in July and August, and I couldn't very well chuck even if I wanted to; and I don't want to. Besides—I must do something."

Anthony nodded with a calmness that conveyed perfectly to Christopher the assurance of the acquiescence, which was all he wanted.

"Of course I know May can't go about or anything of that kind while she's in such deep mourning, but girls are supposed to need chaperons, aren't they? And I don't want her to mope. Even if I wasn't out of doors all day I should be a rotten companion for her. She's used to being with some one clever and artistic and all that," he added hurriedly.

An expressive silence.

"So there it is. I thought I ought to find some one," said Chris; and waited definitely.

"Who could you get?" said Anthony, after a pause sufficiently long to assure him that Christopher had finished his say.

"That's what bothers me. There are several people who'd be willing to come, I suppose," said Chris-

topher. His tone was apologetic, and Anthony guessed he had been looking through the list of his father's pensioners. "But May might not take a fancy to them. I suppose it had better be a relation. I thought of my father's cousin, Lady Clow, as being the most suitable. I don't know her; my father took me to see her once when I was a very little boy, but I've not seen her since. She's the widow of that Sir Joseph Clow who failed in the City, and she has a daughter about the same age as May. They live somewhere in Kensington, and they're rather badly off, I'm afraid. She wrote me the nicest of the letters I got from them all when the poor old governor died. I expect she would n't mind coming to live with us," said Christopher awkwardly. Anthony looked dubious. "Of course, I should make it worth her while," said the young man hastily.

"I was n't thinking of that." Anthony's tone was rather dry. "I was thinking that if you did n't all hit it off perfectly, it might be rather difficult to get rid of her."

"So it would, by Jove!" said Christopher, much struck. "I say, I'd better only ask her on a visit and see how she jumps off. You see," he explained, "it's not that I want any one. It will be a beastly nuisance, in fact, so far as I am concerned, to have a lot of ladies and people about, which will lead to people calling and things like that. But if May ought to have a chaperon, I think a very respectable person with a daughter of her own age would be just right; but, of course, I know nothing about such things."

Anthony found himself reflecting, with some dismay, upon the advent of the widow of the City knight and her daughter, and thought that the absolute peace

which had reigned over Moreleigh for some years past would now be disturbed.

"What does May say?" he enquired.

"I have n't asked her," said Chris, looking at him rather anxiously. "I suppose you 're right, it would n't do to spring a thing of this kind upon her suddenly. She might not like it."

"I think I should find out what she thinks before I did anything definite about it," said Anthony, with the relief of one who sees his way to shifting a responsibility. "And in any case I should n't be in a hurry," he added with characteristic caution. "Take time and think it over."

This advice coincided so exactly with Christopher's inclinations that he accepted it thankfully.

May entered the drawing-room seven minutes after the tea had been carried in and placed upon the table by John Youatt, the stout and cheerful serving-man, who with his sharp spinster sister Ann formed the whole establishment at the Manor House.

Though Lady Denys had chosen to ring for her tea before the appointed hour of five, neither Ann nor her brother, who answered the summons, dreamed of having it ready any sooner or later than usual. Punctually at five it was carried into the oak parlour, and punctually at five the tall figure of Mr. Denys could be seen passing the lattice window, on his way to the rose-clad porch.

May waited punctiliously for old Lady Denys to pass first into the drawing-room, but even as she opened the door her eyes had lighted upon her cousin Anthony, who, characteristically, had found an occupation to fill those seven minutes of waiting.

He stood with his foot upon the brocaded seat of a Chippendale chair, tuning his fiddle, which rested

head downwards on his knee. He looked up as the door opened and the light struck upon his straight profile, and the silver-tipped curls upon his handsome brow, and the old brown velveteen shooting-coat which he wore; and in that moment May fell in love with her cousin Anthony.

He put down his violin with his usual deliberation, and came forward to greet her without waiting for Christopher's introduction, for which, indeed, since Christopher was endeavouring to mitigate his own embarrassment by standing with his hands in his pockets gazing out of the window and whistling loudly, he might have waited in vain.

"I am very glad to see my cousin May at last!" said Anthony; and he took her hand with an air of grave and gentle courtesy that seemed to convert his threadbare coat into a Court suit.

CHAPTER VII

CHRISTOPHER walked back with his sister through the lanes instead of taking the short cut through the park.

The wild roses bloomed in the thick tangle of the hedges, and the climbing honeysuckle hung in masses from the standard hawthorns and curtained the stiff brambles.

The sound of the grass-cutter came pleasantly through the warm air, and the fragrance of new-made haystacks reached them.

The openings in the tall hedgerows framed little pictures of the haymakers; of orchards, where green apples the size of marbles played hide-and-seek among the leaves; of uncut meadows of waving grasses, and long stretches of golden buttercups; of cottage gardens filled with flowering broad beans and potatoes, drifts of white pinks and pansy patches; of white-washed porches, crossed with straggling red roses, and guarded by bushes of everlasting sweet-peas.

They passed the little, grey, sorrowful, aged church, dark with spreading yews, massive, ancient, and twisted of trunk and bough, that guarded the place of the dead in Moreleigh village.

May glanced timidly at Christopher's face as they walked by the lich-gate, but he strode on in his peculiarly impassive manner, looking straight before him, and she did not make the suggestion which trembled on her lips. His cursory manner of returning the

many greetings he received troubled her more than it troubled the recipients of his perfunctory salutes.

It was Master Christopher's way, and they did not expect graciousness from him.

Subscriptions, on the contrary, they did expect, and would doubtless receive, as they had received them from his father, in whose footsteps it was confidently believed that the present owner of the Abbey would tread.

Chris had grown up among the inhabitants of Moreleigh, and was liked well enough, though none of the affection, admiration, and respect which was lavished upon his cousin Anthony came his way, for the Thorvertons were still regarded as newcomers and interlopers by their tenants.

But it suited the village that a rich man who disputed no bills, and asked no troublesome questions, should reside at the Abbey; where work was plentiful and payment liberal, and where, also, jobs could be multiplied indefinitely and feasts were not few.

When they heard that Christopher had refused to occupy his father's vacant place upon the bench of magistrates, they only laughed.

"A vine business Master Christopher wude have made of it. Shows his sense. He bain't one tu take no trouble, and var why shude he take trouble wi' arl that money? He'll amuse hisself from marn till night with his cricket and such, and that there Captain Sandry, with his oily tongue, will du better still for hisself than he did in the old master's time. Ay, for certain sure he'll feather his nest, and smarl blame tu him. And Cloberry, too. They'll be having vine times up to the Abbey tu be sure!"

"But I wude n't let my darter go tu service up along," said the mothers of the village in chorus.

"Mrs. Foss, her was a gude guide for the maidens once, but her be getting tu old to check they now as once her checked 'un. She don't luke after the maidens as she did art, nar yet after nothing else tu the Abbey."

May was conscious of many curious, kindly eyes gazing after her, as she walked beside her brother, and hoped that some day these buxom, rosy-cheeked women and the white-headed, staring children who clung to their skirts would be known to her, too; but Christopher did not pause to introduce her to any one now.

He merely said "Come on!" in rather impatient tones if she slackened her pace for a moment to look or exclaim at the prettiness of the village, or the beauty of the distant blue hills in the evening sunshine; and he seemed relieved when they turned at length into the long avenue of branching limes which led to the open space before the Abbey, where the deer moved lightly over the daisied grass.

"I 'm glad you like it," he said, at last meeting her eye and responding to her murmur of pleasure and admiration. "I 'll show you the cricket ground to-morrow; and, I say, I tell you what—if you 're too tired, don't you come down to dinner to-night. It shall be sent up to your room."

"I am not at all too tired, but it is very kind of you to think of it," she said gratefully.

He looked at her with a softened expression.

"By Jove, you 've a lot of pluck! Most girls would be tired, I expect, after travelling, and going to see Cousin Rosabelle, and all that."

He covered the embarrassment engendered by this burst of admiration with a hasty plunge into the subject of his proposed invitation to Lady Clow, and

rather to his surprise, his sister approved the suggestion warmly.

"If they are so poor, Chris—a mother and daughter living alone together like mamma and me—it might be a kindness. And surely if we are so rich we ought to do as many kindnesses as possible," she said, very simply.

"It's to you I wanted to do the kindness," said Chris gruffly. "I don't care a hang about Lady Clow, and still less about her daughter."

"I should like them to come, unless you would rather wait until you and I had had time to know each other better. If you felt like that, of course I should be only too happy to be here quite alone with you," said May, looking at him anxiously to try and discover what he really wished.

"Well, that's just the point. We can't be quite alone," said Chris, in rather embarrassed tones. "You see, it's rather difficult to be alone at all in a big place like this, what with visitors, and so on. There's Sandry—Captain Sandry, the agent. He's a gentleman, of course—and he lived in the house in my father's time, so I can't ask him to go and live in the agent's cottage now. Besides, it's let, and jolly well let, too. And, after all, poor old Sandry isn't a bad sort when you get to know him, and he saves me no end of trouble. And that reminds me, I hope you won't let any one set you against him, for it would be a frightful nuisance if he took it into his head he wanted to leave. When I tell you he made eighty runs for Moreleigh *v.* Burstin the other day you'll understand, especially as they had Levett bowling—one of the fastest bowlers in England," he explained. "D'ye see?"

May did not see, but she understood that Chris-

topher was, in a manner, making an appeal to her, and she responded instantly.

"Of course I'll do my very best to make friends with Captain Sandry."

"I don't know about *friends*. So long as you get on all right, that's all that matters," said Christopher in tones of relief. "And, of course, the same thing applies more or less to the other fellows who've been in the habit of staying with me; Joe Murch, for instance—he's rather a pal of mine. He's had frightful bad luck—sent down from Oxford, more or less by mistake. He minded it frightfully because his mother's poor and had an awful job to send him at all. So it was extra rough on him that all her pinching and screwing should be thrown away. He used to stay here in my father's time, and I expect he'll want to come; sure to turn up sooner or later anyhow. In fact he's rather given to inviting himself at short notice, and I couldn't very well say no as he's always done it before. He won't be much in your line, I'm afraid!" he cast another involuntary glance at the slender figure in black beside him, so simply gowned but so trim and exquisite and fresh in every detail of her dress and floating veil, with a face so delicately fair of feature and colouring.

"Of course I shall be glad to know all your friends, Chris," said May, in surprise. "And, of course, they must be nice, or you wouldn't be fond of them."

Chris swung his cane uneasily.

"I don't know about Joe being particularly nice. All I know is, he's a good sort at heart, when you get to know him. He takes a bit of knowing," he muttered.

She had to discover later that Chris had an obstinate, if amiable, prejudice in favour of his most un-

desirable associates being considered what he chose to designate "good sorts."

"So you see," he went on lamely, "it's not as if we should be alone. That's why I thought it would be nicer for you to have another lady in the house. Anthony suggested my asking if you'd like it before I invited anybody, though."

"That was very thoughtful of him," said May, flushing. "Yes, I see what you mean, and I should like Lady Clow and her daughter to come here very much."

"Perhaps you would n't mind writing the letter of invitation, then," said Chris, visibly brightening. "But, mind, it's only to be a visit until we see how they jump off. I forget the girl's name, it's an awful rum one, anyway. Stay, I'll get you the letter. I expect the invitation would come best from you. Anyhow, they'll be sure to like it better, and it will save me a frightful lot of trouble. I hate writing letters, and I should be certain to say the wrong thing and give them the hump, and then very likely they would n't come at all, which would be rotten. Mind you make out the favour is all on their side. When people are down on their luck they're generally inclined to be touchy."

May was only too delighted to be entrusted with a mission so delicate.

She found her old nurse waiting for her in an immense bedroom, with four windows which looked over the park and away to the distant blue of the Devon hills.

One of the new Paris frocks was laid out conspicuously—a little heap of gauzy black—upon the delicate rose silk quilt of the brightly-curtained fourposter.

The gold and tortoise-shell fittings of the new bag

were carefully arranged upon the glass top of the highly-polished dressing-chest, with its oval Dresden mirror.

But before she could begin to dress she had to be welcomed, embraced, and wept over by old Mrs. Foss, the housekeeper, who could hardly refrain from pouring out her troubles to the daughter of her late beloved mistress then and there.

"But you 'll forgive me, Miss May, for there 's no one has lived so long in this place as me. I 've seen the old folks die, and Sir Anthony and his dear lady come and go, and stopped on for their sakes, not to let the place they loved so well go to rack and ruin along of strangers' ways. And I was rewarded when your poor mamma married Mr. Thorverton and brought the old family back to the Abbey by so doing. That is, as far as she could, when Mr. Thorverton would n't give up his own name, nor yet let his son. But, oh, Miss May, no one but myself knows all I 've gone through since your poor mamma took and left us. Though for the sake of the best china and many other reasons, I could n't bring myself to leave the poor master to his misery. And Master Chris was safe so long as I was here, and well they all knew it. But, Miss May, he 's nothing but a boy still, for all he 's pleased to think hisself a man, and sadly we want a lady about the place again, even though she may be but a young one like yourself, Miss May. And if I may make so bold, ma'am, you 'll take your proper place at once while you 're new and every one waiting to see what you 're going to do. Master Chris, his bark is worse than his bite, and if you stand up to him he 'll give way, and more especially when he 's not used to you, so to speak. And don't let that Captain Sandry come over you, as he 's come over Master

Christopher, ma'am. I do run on, but if your poor mamma had been spared to come home with you she 'd have explained as how I was n't like an ordinary servant to her, ma'am, but one as she 'd sit with and talk to by the hour of old times gone for ever."

She broke down and sobbed so bitterly that even Margery's jealousy was partially appeased.

May stood between these two faithful servants whose devotion to her mother was now transferred to herself, and was grateful to both—to the hale, hearty West Country woman who was Margery Snow, comely and apple-cheeked in her mature prime; and the little, bent, withered, wrinkled spinster of eighty odd, in her respectable black silk gown trimmed with ancient fringes, and ornamented by a cameo brooch and a heavy gold watch and chain.

Margery had been a fine, handsome, upstanding wench, who had chosen to give the go-by to a score of would-be lovers in her time, and who was still attractive by reason of her wholesome colouring and buxom figure; but Sally Foss had been sallow and wizened even as a young maid; rumour said she had received her first offer of marriage at the age of fifty-three, when she was known to have saved a goodly sum of money, and when a prudent butler who wished to emigrate had conceived the idea of acquiring the necessary capital by an interested marriage with Mrs. Foss.

But the housekeeper had seen through his honourable intentions, and rejected him with scorn, remarking with great candour that if she could not be married for love she would not be married at all.

She had never held a high opinion of the male sex in general, but after the butler's proposal she rated mankind lower than ever.

Her interest in life centred in the Abbey, of which she had been the real custodian for over half a century, watching the actual owners come and go. And faithfully she loved and revered the family to whom, in her mind, unaffected as it remained by legal transactions, the Abbey would for ever belong.

May held the shaking mittened fingers of the old housekeeper in one of her own little soft white hands, and gave the other to Margery, whose jealousy she divined and was anxious to soothe.

"Neither you nor Margery could ever be ordinary people to me, for both of you loved mamma, and she trusted you both, and left Margery to take care of me, and you to take care of Christopher, Mrs. Foss."

"Call me Foss, my lamb, I 'm not to be Mrs. Nobody to you, as 't is only a courtesy title at the best, since I 've never been wedded nor never wanted to," sobbed the housekeeper.

"I will call you whatever you like, and I will come and sit with you and talk to you of old times, as poor mamma did, whenever you like," said the pretty soft voice, and May looked kindly into the shrunken face where nose and chin so nearly met, below eyes that were mere glittering beads set in a meshwork of wrinkles.

Margery presently led the old woman away, confiding her to the care of an alarmed housemaid, for she was completely unnerved by the emotions of greeting and memory which May's advent had aroused.

"She 's that old and shaking she did arter retire, that 's what she did arter du," said Margery, shaking her head. "Here be you arlways a carling of me an old woman, though I 've told yu time upon time I were n't no such a thing; and I be near thirty year younger than she as was eighty-vour last Michaelmas

Day, and bain't witty enough to govern they maidens no more as du sarce her from marning till night. But arl the same for that, her tarks gude sense about yu taking of your place, Miss May, for they won't dare sarce yu as can take and sack the lot wi' a word, though how yu be going tu manage this great place I can't tell," said Margery sorrowfully. "'T will take an old head on young shoulders, indeed, tu cope with an idle plundering lot like they du be."

"Are they idle and plundering?" said May, with a sinking heart.

"I 've had a tell wi' one or tu as used to be here in the old days, and they arl zing the zame zong," said Margery darkly. "But do 'ee get a gude influence over Master Chris, my dear, and 't will maybe arl come right yet, though not one, high or low, but has a bad word for that there Sandry man, and, that being so, you may depend on 't, Miss May, as there must be something wrong wi' him."

May descended the broad staircase, and paused beneath the great archway leading into a lofty room, sixty feet long, with a musician's gallery at the farther end, which was known as the banqueting hall. This had been the principal living room of the Abbey since the departure of the Denys family and the dismantlement of the drawing-rooms, which May's mother had never refurnished, partly out of sentiment, and partly because she did not like the modern wing of the Abbey to which they belonged. But to the plenishing of the Elizabethan room in which May now found herself Mrs. Thorverton had devoted an infinity of time and trouble and artistic knowledge.

Christopher, standing from force of habit, with his back to the immense log-piled hearth, was an incon-

gruous figure in that time-mellowed dignified chamber, with its carven oak and faded tapestry, faintly lit by the afterglow of sunset which shone through the tall, narrow windows.

May, also, was perhaps an incongruous, though charming figure, as she advanced, rather shyly, across the wide space of polished floor to join her brother; but Christopher did not recognise the incongruity, though he felt the charm. Her little French frock, which was soft and clinging, revealing through transparent black her fair neck and arms, reached only to her slender ankles, and displayed slim feet in narrow suède shoes.

Her brown hair was combed loosely off her brow and fell back over it to shade it slightly, while the ends were twisted into a little Greek knot of curls at the back of her small head.

The extreme seriousness of her expression was very attractive, taken in conjunction with her youth and mourning.

May had not inherited her mother's piquant and mobile beauty, but her straight delicate profile lent itself to gravity, as did the womanly curves of her slight figure to a dignity which contrasted curiously with the childishness of the short oval face and the innocent candour of the deep blue eyes.

Chris muttered beneath his breath "By Jove!" and flushed a dull red over his sunburnt face and square jowl.

There was almost a lump in his throat and a dimness in his eyes for a moment as he realised that this fair maiden was the little sister who had played with him long ago in this very hall. He made room for her on the hearthrug beside him, as though a fire were actually blazing in the chimney, and as though he wished her to share the warmth.

"I say, it's rather jolly, isn't it?—your coming here to keep house with me like this," he said, with a sudden burst of feeling. "It makes the place look different, I can tell you, to see you about. I hope you'll like it."

"Oh, Chris!" With a timid movement instinct with gratitude and warmth of feeling she slipped her hand beneath his unresponsive but willing arm. "Who could help liking it? The Abbey is so beautiful and you are so kind."

"Oh, rot!" said Chris. "I mean, bosh about being kind. It's your home as much as mine. And, look here, that reminds me, you take care you get everything you want, d'ye see? Make every one do as you say. I told old Foss you'd choose your own room, and be the missus, and all that." He relaxed into a broad smile, which momentarily so changed the character of his face that May was startled. "I say, you know, it's a rum start, isn't it?" he remarked, surveying her with secret pride. "You'll take the shine out of the Garry girls, and they're supposed to be the pick of the basket in these parts. But they don't get their things from Paris, I expect. Mind you go on getting your things there."

May took this injunction as a proof that he appreciated her frock, and was pleased.

"Who are the Garry girls?" she said.

"One of them's rather pretty," said Chris, imagining that in making this statement he was answering his sister's question—"Kathleen, the grown-up one. The other two are flappers, all legs and arms, and hair flying about. You'll see them in church. I don't really know 'em to speak to, but Cousin Rosabelle does—she knows everybody."

Suddenly he glanced at the clock and changed his

tone. "I say, it's past dinner-time. What the deuce are they waiting for?" He pulled savagely at the bell.

"What the devil are you waiting for?" he cried angrily, as Cloberry appeared.

"I believe Captain Sandry's late, sir. He said something about waiting for him," said Cloberry, with deferential sympathy and a sly but quite apparent satisfaction.

"What the devil has that to do with me? Dinner's at the hour it's ordered at," said Christopher in a rage. He caught sight of May's shocked, amazed face, and subdued his voice. "I never gave orders to wait for anybody," he growled. "Look here, Cloberry, you see it does n't happen again, else the cook will have to go, d 'ye see? Dinner is to be served as the clock strikes—unless Miss Thorverton says it is n't," he added, with a sudden inspiration.

"Very good, sir."

Cloberry slid away noiselessly to report triumphantly to the household the vicarious snub that had been administered to the agent.

"All very well when his back's turned. I should have liked to hear he'd been told of his impudence to his face," said the cook. "Of course, dinner's ready and spoiling."

"Master Christopher won't never have the courage to say a word to his face, for fear of hurting his precious feelings," said the butler, shrugging his shoulders; "and she's only a bit of a slip of a girl —the Captain 's more likely to get round her."

"Then he'll do no such thing," cried Margery, who was renewing an old friendship with the cook; "for I've warned her against him. And she've got all her poor mamma's spirit, and a bit over to fly with!"

But May needed no warning from Margery to rouse her distrust of Captain Sandry.

He was an old-young man with a bald head and a black waxed moustache; tall and spare and active of figure, with regular, rather pinched features, a low voice, and muscular, nervous hands.

When he talked to women he invariably approached them rather closely, looked down into their eyes, and assumed a confidential manner; nor was he able to differentiate between the class of woman who would be attracted and the class who would be repelled by this behaviour. His manner to May was deferential in the extreme, and his greeting inspired her with a dislike she had some ado to conceal, though it was intended to assure her that he fully recognised her position as mistress of her brother's house.

"It will be delightful to have a lady presiding over the breakfast-table," he said, pressing her hand slightly. "Christie is not much of a tea-maker, and I have to look after that sort of thing for him. I can't tell you how glad I shall be to relinquish my task into your fair hands."

May uttered an inaudible murmur, which he chose to interpret as encouragement to proceed.

"You will be looking after Christie's interests indoors, while I am doing the same out-of-doors," he said. "You are a lucky fellow, Christie, to be relieved of all responsibility!"

Chris growled out a word that sounded like "Rot!" but it was no part of Captain Sandry's business to hear such ejaculations.

"That's what old Christie hates—responsibility," he said affectionately. "You'll find that out, Miss—er—Miss—er——"

"Thorverton," said May, so suddenly and distinctly

that he was surprised into saying: "I beg your pardon. Of course."

At this moment dinner was announced, and Chris marched straight to the dining-room, looking neither to the right nor to the left, apparently leaving his sister and the agent to follow or not, as they chose.

"Allow me," said Captain Sandry, and May was obliged to accept the arm he offered.

He hesitated for a moment upon entering the dining-room, but Chris said, without looking up:

"Your place is at the foot of the table, May," and Captain Sandry immediately took his seat at the side, smiling amiably.

Throughout dinner the master of the house remained glum, and May was obliged to sustain a kind of conversation with Captain Sandry, rendered yet more difficult by his constant interpolations of flattering or affectionate references to the unresponsive Christopher.

She had had some experience of her brother's taciturnity at meals and of his over-fondness for the pleasures of the table; but hitherto she had been able to chatter to him quite freely, content with monosyllabic replies or sympathetic nods in return.

Now she looked across the massive silver plate and the lovely heads of specimen roses which relieved the vast expanse of white damask separating her from her brother, and observed, with sinking heart, the sullenness of Christopher's face as he bent over the food which was absorbing his attention.

She felt as though he had become suddenly estranged and indifferent and wondered how their intimacy could ever progress in the constant presence of this third and, to her, most unpleasing personality.

After dinner she sat alone for a very long quarter of an hour, looking at the picture papers which were

laid in profusion upon a side table, and then Chris opened the dining-room door, shouted: "We 're going to play billiards. Like to come?" and slammed it in her face.

It was opened again immediately by Captain Sandry, who smiled agreeably as he led the way down a black, narrow winding passage to the billiard-room.

Chris appeared to be too much engrossed in ransacking a stand for his favourite cue to observe his sister's entry; and Cloberry had to be rung for, and angry enquiries made as to whether the servants had been using the billiard-table in his absence. But calm was restored and the thunder-cloud on the young master's brow dispersed when Cloberry espied and produced the missing cue from a corner, where it had been reposing ever since its owner's departure.

"Oh, there it is! By the bye, I remember putting it there myself," said Chris, receiving it and handling it tenderly.

Cloberry withdrew, and perhaps Christopher desired to make amends for the unnecessary violence of temper which he had displayed, for he took some pains to instruct May in the art of marking.

She pursued this occupation patiently, while, as it seemed to her, endless whiskies-and-sodas were consumed, and the air became thick with the smoke of cigars; and it was Captain Sandry who suggested presently that she must be very tired and ought to go to bed.

May vaguely resented the suggestion, but she was too utterly weary not to profit by it; and Chris showed her a winding staircase behind a sliding panel, which was a short cut to the bedrooms, and bade her goodnight, inclining his face for her salute as usual. She fancied he squeezed her hand with a kind meaning,

but his face was so impassive that she could not be sure that it was not merely an involuntary pressure, to guide her to the right step.

Tired as she was, the luxury of her big bedroom pleased her eyes as she entered and found Margery waiting beside the brilliantly lighted dressing-table.

After one glance at the tired whiteness of May's face, Margery busied herself in silence, unhooking the filmy black frock and wrapping the pretty, white childish form that emerged in a snowy kimono.

But as she brushed out the short brown curly hair, she permitted herself to break the silence, and urged her young mistress not to get up the next morning, but to have her breakfast brought to her upstairs.

"No, no, Margery! I shall be all right after my night's rest. The bed looks so delicious and comfortable with those big soft pillows and lace-edged sheets; fit for a princess. I have never slept in such a bed in my life."

"Mrs. Foss have done everything she could think of to get everything nice for you. Master Chris said you was to have the best bedroom and everything you fancied, and quite right, too!" said Margery proudly.

"He is very kind to me," said May, and her pretty mouth quivered. "Is it very late, Margery? I wonder when they will stop playing billiards? They went on for ages and ages, and yet I heard Captain Sandry say: 'Let's have another hundred up,' as I came away."

"Cloberry says they never come upstairs much before one in the marning," said Margery, shaking her head. "And he's afraid to say how much whiskey goes. Oh, Miss May, if you could but get a good influence over poor Master Christopher and find some

nice young ladies and gentlemen of your own sart to come about him, and take up his tharts. For Cloberry says that that there Joe Murch as comes to stay here so often is more like a stable groom than a gentleman, though there 's not a groom in the stable here as wud n't be ashamed to sit and soak hisself in spirits, night after night, in a gentleman's house as he does. I 'm so terrible feared from arl I du hear as this bain't a fit house for yu tu stop in, if you don't get some of yure own sart to keep yu company, Miss May, and that you 'd be better off across the way at her ladyship's."

"Chris is my own brother, and very good to me, and, of course, I shall stay with him," said May reprovingly, but though her words were brave her heart was full of vague fears. "If his friends are not nice all the more reason that I should try and take care of him. And Mr. Gethell is coming down soon. I dare say being a lawyer, he will see at a glance whether Mr. Murch is a good companion for Chris or not, and point it out to him if he is n't. Besides, Chris is going to ask a lady here, a cousin of ours; he is quite aware I ought to have a chaperon," she ended with dignity.

"Oh, Miss May! be careful. I wud n't ask nobody without her ladyship's advice, and what du Master Christopher know about chaperons?" said Margery uneasily. "Though to be sure it is n't fit for a young lady like yu tu be biding here alone, wi' a lot of college men and the like, and never a woman tu speak tu but me and Mrs. Foss, as must du what we 're told and keep our mouths shut. But ladies—I never heard tell as Mr. Thorverton had any ladies in his family of any account whatever!" said Margery, shaking her head.

CHAPTER VIII

"DEAR COUSIN JENNIFER,—I hope you will allow me to call you so, as it is less formal and my brother Christopher says you are a cousin, and he remembers being taken to see you when he was a little boy.

"He wishes me to write for us both, to say we should be so pleased if you would come and pay us a visit, and bring Cousin Erica with you. As we are in deep mourning for our mother, it will be very quiet; but Chris thought you might not mind this, as you said in your kind letter to him that you wished you could see Moreleigh again, and it is so pretty here. It would be very nice for me to have other ladies staying here, as at present I am alone with my brother.

"—Your affectionate cousin,

"MAY THORVERTON."

This letter was handed across the breakfast-table of a lodging-house in West Kensington by Lady Clow to her daughter, who perused it without echoing her mother's exclamation of pleasure.

"I don't see why you need come, mamma," she observed calmly, as she handed the letter back again.

Lady Clow gazed helplessly across the table at her child.

"You always say something I don't expect, Erica," she said, almost tearfully.

"I am sorry to disappoint you, but you always expect the obvious."

"How can you go without me when it is particularly I who am asked?"

"Just as you like," said Erica; "only it seems to me that this is a chance for me to meet a most eligible young man."

"You will meet him none the less because I take you!" cried Lady Clow. "And I wish you would not say such things! It is for me to think of his being eligible, and not you. I don't know what girls are coming to nowadays."

"Everybody will see what I am coming to if you insist upon going everywhere with me!" retorted Erica, with a slight laugh, which, though not ill-natured, cut her mother to the heart. "I am very good-looking, and might marry anybody, if only you would n't stand in the way like a danger signal advertising exactly what I am going to be like in thirty years' time."

"Erica!" cried Lady Clow once more, and this time she really wept, but only for a moment.

Erica's dispassionate and critical observation made it difficult even to cry in comfort.

Miss Clow spoke no more than the truth when she declared herself to be good-looking.

She was inclined to be buxom, but she was not at present more buxom than became a maiden of her years, which numbered five-and-twenty; and her colouring was of that perfect purity which should, and seldom does, accompany red-gold hair.

Erica's hair was of the true copper tint, and so immensely long and thick that it carried a natural ripple from the very weight of its own coils wound above her white forehead.

Her face and features were perhaps a trifle larger than she could have wished, but she was built on a scale to correspond, and the cream and rose of her complexion, the alluring curve of her parted red lips over white teeth sloping inwards, the perfect lines of her throat and bust and shoulders made it almost impossible to suggest that there could be too much of such fresh and brilliant beauty.

But opposite her sat her mother, and in every curve and billow of that shapeless mass of flesh, every coarsened outline of expanded feature, every shade of scarlet where the colour had spread from vast expanse of face to manifold chin, and heavy bulging neck did that mother reveal to the curious the probable future of Erica.

The only difference lay in the expression. While Lady Clow's light-blue eyes had the surprised amiability and meaningless roundness of a baby's orbs Erica's were cold and wary.

When she smiled they hardly changed; but the dimples set at the corner of her red mouth, and in the middle of her soft white chin, were so attractive that few noticed the absence of any corresponding twinkle in the laughter-narrowed eyes above. And when she was not laughing, the size and the shape of those eyes, with their thick golden fringes, left little to be desired.

"I have nothing to wear," said Erica, abandoning for the moment, but as Lady Clow knew too well, but temporarily, the question of her mother's acceptance of the invitation for herself as well as for her child. "I shall need some decent clothes."

"We must see what can be done," said Lady Clow, sighing.

Even anxiety could not lend pathos to her expres-

sion. Her rotundity gave her an outward appearance of content and jollity that was contradicted in vain by the tears that glistened upon her large cheeks.

"Why did n't you tell me about these people before? And that you had written to them?" said Erica, frowning, as she noted the tears.

"I never thought anything would come of my writing to them. It was just an impulse. I only saw the late Christopher Thorverton once after he married. We are very distant cousins, and he was a difficult man to know well. He helped your dear father at the time of our misfortunes. We were under such heavy obligations to him, in fact, that your dear father could n't bear to hear his name mentioned, nor to speak of our debt to him; for we knew too well there was no chance of our ever being able to pay him back. Not that it mattered to Christopher Thorverton, for he was rolling in money. But still your dear father had his pride. However, when I saw his death in the paper I thought of writing to his son."

"Is he the only son?"

"I suppose so. Yes, of course. It must be the little boy he brought to see us when he came in answer to the letter your poor papa wrote appealing for help, to find out what he could do for us. Well, people said a great many things against him, and no doubt he was rather rough, but he had a generous heart. I heard of his separation from his wife a year or so later, and I wrote to him then. But he never answered the letter; and then your poor father died, and I forgot everything in the sorrow and——"

"How old would the son be?" said Erica, cutting her mother's lamentations short without an instant's hesitation, and pursuing her own train of thought.

Lady Clow was too much accustomed to this procedure to resent it; she meekly abandoned her unfinished sentence, and set herself to consider the answer to Erica's question.

"Let me see—when he came to see me—that was the year of your dear father's failure, and the little boy was then—no, yes, he must be about two-and-twenty," she said.

"I like boys of that age; they are so easy to manage," said Erica. "You 'll write this morning, of course, to accept, and say we will go at once. And we can decide later whether I go alone, or whether you come with me."

"No, Erica, we shall decide now," said Lady Clow, with unwonted firmness. "I mean to come. I spent all last summer here while you were visiting, and for any one so stout as I am the heat is very trying in London at this time of year. Besides, this poor young thing has lost her mother, and there ought to be somebody with her. She is younger than her brother."

"She writes like a simpleton," said Erica, scanning the round hand of the letter which May had composed so carefully, and copied out so neatly, more than once, before she ventured to send it.

"She writes in a very nice, warm-hearted way, I think," said Lady Clow, sighing, "and I am sure we may be very thankful she should write at all. Not everybody cares to ask their poor relations on a long visit in this indefinite manner, and Moreleigh Abbey is one of the most beautiful old houses in England. I saw it at the time of Christopher Thorverton's wedding. He married one of the old family, a Denys of Moreleigh. She was a beautiful girl, and I could not help thinking how extraordinarily common and plain poor Christopher looked standing next her. How-

ever, he was a big man, which is always something, and she was very much in love with him, though no one gave her credit for caring for anything but his money. But a woman never makes a mistake when she sees people together," said Lady Clow, shaking her head with a sentimental expression.

"Let us hope the youth will take after his mother in looks, and his father in size," said Erica, yawning. "It will make my task less disagreeable."

"I wish you would n't talk so."

"Why? Would n't you be pleased if I were to marry him?"

"No—yes—no; yes, of course. I mean you spoil all the pleasure I might have in anything, Erica, talking in that cold-blooded way!" said poor Lady Clow.

"You know very well for what reason you were so anxious to see the Abbey again," said Erica coldly. "At least, you would know if you analysed your motives for writing to our cousin Christopher, and were honest with yourself, which you never seem to be."

"You should not speak so to me, Erica. You should not, indeed."

"Of course I should n't before other people; but why keep up any farce at all when we are alone. Don't you think it seems rather futile?"

"I am not keeping up any farce. I wish you would n't talk so!" wailed Lady Clow again; but Erica had risen from her chair and was stretching her shapely arms above her golden head, yawning audibly once more, and paying not the slightest attention to her mother's entreaty.

"I hate pretence," she said. "Heavens, how sleepy I am! Nine o'clock is a senseless hour to have breakfast. I wish I had stayed in bed. However, the sooner I go out and order some new frocks, the sooner

they will be made. I suppose on an occasion like this, you will give me *carte-blanche?*"

"How can I give you *carte-blanche?*" almost shrieked her mother. "You know very well, Erica, I have n't the money to do it with. And you 've had your allowance over and over again this year already."

Two days later there came to the Kensington lodging a curt note from Christopher Thorverton signifying his content in their ready acceptance of his sister's invitation; and conveying his anxiety lest the journey to Moreleigh should be an expense to his cousin Jennifer and her daughter. A cheque for fifty pounds accompanied the letter, but concerning neither the letter nor this enclosure did Christopher breathe one word to his sister.

Mr. Gethell arrived from London to stay at the Abbey, and Mr. Joseph Murch followed him, so that May presently had to pour out coffee for four men, when she came down to breakfast in the big dining-room at Moreleigh.

They were of strangely different types.

Christopher, heavy-shouldered and sullen-faced, with manners abrupt to rudeness, and fair brows lowering above the dark blue eyes, which she could never see without a softening recollection of her mother.

Captain Sandry, smooth and suave and sallow, with black eyes furtively watching her; Joe Murch, red-haired and red-faced, with red-rimmed eyes which rarely lifted themselves at all, save when he attempted to chaff his silent host; the bright-eyed, grey-whiskered, wholesome face of honest Mr. Gethell, who made polite conversation with her, and would fain have made business appointments with Christopher.

To May it appeared that Christopher grew more

and more silent with the multiplication of his visitors. He had spoken little when she was alone with him, less from the moment of Captain Sandry's appearance upon the scene, and while becoming monosyllabic with the advent of Mr. Gethell, seemed to be struck dumb altogether by the first noisy greeting of his friend, Joe Murch.

Mr. Gethell pursued his client faithfully with hands full of papers, and a stylographic pen in his pocket, pinning him down to business whenever he got the chance, which was not very often. He was in despair at Christopher's utter indifference to his own interests, and confided his uneasiness to May, who sympathised sincerely.

"If only I could do anything to help you!" she said anxiously; "though it is true I do not know much about business. Chris is so much taken up with his cricket; but me—I have nothing to do from morning till night, except that now my cousin, Mr. Denys, has kindly promised to give me riding-lessons, since Chris has so little time," and she blushed at the mention of Anthony's name.

Mr. Gethell did not observe the blush, and if he had, would have merely supposed that May was blushing, and very properly, for her brother's idleness.

"I only wish you could help me on his behalf, my dear young lady," he said mournfully. "I am sure it would be a pleasure to work with you. But, unfortunately, you are not qualified to act for your brother."

He was the most conscientious of men, and pointed out again and again to his young client how heavy were his responsibilities, and how lightly he was evading them. Also that his duty now required him to

concern himself rather with the signing of documents than with the handling of a cricket bat.

But when Chris was not actually playing in a match, he appeared to spend his time practising at the nets on the Abbey cricket-field, which was kept in perfect order by his own ground-bowler; and when he was not practising at the nets, he was playing hard singles at lawn tennis with Captain Sandry. His energy was remarkable, but every atom of it was expended in games, which had become the business of his life.

In wet weather there was real tennis in the court his father had built for him; and his evenings were generally devoted to billiards with Captain Sandry, who played his young opponent and patron with the utmost dexterity, keeping just so far ahead of him as was necessary to excite his emulation, and upon very rare occasions permitting him to taste the pleasure of victory.

"I suppose in this lovely weather Chris likes to be out all day, and that is why he loves cricket so much; and at night, as he does not care for reading, of course he must do something, and billiards is a very fascinating amusement," said May apologetically. "Still, I am beginning to understand why foreigners think that English people care for nothing but playing games. Perhaps in winter he will have more time for work."

"Your brother hunts six days a week in winter, which he would tell you was very hard work indeed," said Mr. Gethell, shaking his head. "But if he would set aside even a single hour daily in which to occupy himself seriously now I should be thankful. It would soon become a habit, and extend itself to a longer period. He is so young. I wish, my dear young lady, that you would use your influence."

"I have known my brother so short a time, and he is older than I am. I don't like to interfere," said May, but her blue eyes were troubled, and she sought counsel from Lady Denys.

The old lady's eyes flashed as she listened, and her face lighted up with eagerness.

"Oh, May! my little May, we are kindred spirits indeed," she cried tremulously. "Mr. Gethell is quite right, quite right. You must rouse yourself, my dear, and put aside the thoughts of your sorrow, and use your influence to save your brother."

"But you and Cousin Anthony, who have known him all his life, must surely have more influence than I!"

"It is never the people we have known all our lives who influence us, but always strangers. They are tired of my old counsels. Chris is tired of them, and Anthony, too, is tired!" she said bitterly. "My flame of life is too nearly quenched to be a guide to any one. It is flickering and dying. I feel it so. But yours will burn steadily and brightly, and throw fresh light upon your brother's careless way. You will wake him to some sense of responsibility."

"He tries to take care of me," said May wistfully. "He does not know very well how to do it, which makes it a little pathetic as well as amusing, but he does try always."

"I am thankful to hear it, for he has never hitherto shown a spark of interest in any one save himself. Alas, my little May! I don't like to think of your being up at the Abbey alone with these men, and no one wiser than Chris to look after you."

"But Christopher does not like it, either; he has asked a lady to come and stay with us on purpose!" cried May. And she told her cousin of the invitation

which had been despatched to Lady Clow and her daughter.

"But that is out of the frying-pan into the fire!" cried the old lady in dismay. "Relatives of Christopher Thorverton! I had no idea he had any! They must certainly be quite impossible people."

"I hope not," said May, frightened. "For I begged Chris to ask them at once, and they have already accepted."

"Accepted? Of course they have accepted!" said Cousin Rosabelle drily.

"They sounded very like mamma and me," said May timidly. "They are alone together, living in rooms, and very badly off. I thought it would be pleasant to have a girl to talk to, and to play tennis with. I do not play well enough to be of any use to Christopher. He likes to play so hard. I only spoil the game for them all. But with another girl, it would be so much nicer."

"It depends on the girl," said Lady Denys, with a groan. "What a misfortune for a pair of babies, like you and Christopher, to be playing at housekeeping in a place like Moreleigh. You will be pursued by toadies and fortune-hunters. Why had n't Christopher Thorverton the sense to make Anthony your brother's guardian until he was five-and-twenty at least?" And she shed tears of vexation and annoyance, but recovered suddenly as a new idea entered her mind.

"I will write to Lady Erriff at once and ask her to come and see me. There are young people there —energetic young men of a very different class from the friends Chris has picked up for himself at Oxford. They would not have cared for him alone, but now that you—" She checked herself. "Well, she is a

nice woman, and will probably take you under her wing and ask you over to Kellacombe."

"Oh, Cousin Rosabelle! you forget I am in deep, deep mourning. I could n't go anywhere!" cried May, in dismay at this suggestion. "And, besides, I don't think Chris would go. He told me himself he hated going to other people's houses. I am sure the bad manners that vex you so are really only shyness, from having been brought up in such seclusion; and neither of us would care to go anywhere just now in any case."

"Nonsense, my love, it is not a question of your going anywhere. She ought to call on you sooner or later; and call she shall. I will send her a line, and get her here to talk things over with me first. She is a well-meaning woman, though a great gossip, and is looked up to on account of her position, though she bores people to death. Most of my visitors tire and disappoint me. I have outlived my old friends, and I don't care for new ones. At least, not for any one hereabouts. They speak a different language. But you are *simpatica*, little May, as your mother was before you; and though you are so young, there is a weight of responsibility on your brow, as though you were born to take care of others, and knew your destiny beforehand. You won't waste your life, nor let Christopher waste his. I am tired of looking on at the comedy of wasted lives," she said bitterly, "and it does not amuse me."

May looked at her cousin wistfully, half divining that Lady Denys was not thinking of Christopher nor of herself, half anxious to console her by showing her own willingness to take advice.

"I will do my best, my very best," she said humbly. "I know one ought not to be selfish in one's grief,

and that it is right that Christopher should have a chance of seeing nice people. It is true his friends are not—not good enough for him. I will do what you think right, Cousin Rosabelle," she said.

"I am very sure of one thing. The Garry girls and their brothers would be far more suitable companions for you and Christopher than Captain Sandry and Joe Murch—or, for the matter of that, this Clow woman and her daughter," said Lady Denys, tossing her head.

May generally found herself a little depressed after an interview with her cousin Rosabelle.

The old women with whom she had had any acquaintance in the past had been of a different type. They had always seemed content to be laid aside, as it were, for their rest, in the chimney-corners of life; smiling indulgently upon the follies and enthusiasms of youth; engaged, but always calmly, in the making of their souls, the cosseting of their failing bodies, and their pious meditations.

That Cousin Rosabelle, who must actually be on the threshold of another world, should yet be so ardently interested in the present, so full of fiery regrets and vehement longings, and impatience and ambition, as May perceived her to be, amazed and almost shocked the child, who would fain have revered her aged relative.

May began to realise something of Christopher's relief in exchanging the atmosphere of Cousin Rosabelle's oak parlour, so charged with the electricity of stormy feeling, for the calm of Anthony's workshop. Its master's very absorption in manual labour produced a soothing effect.

Anthony, on his side, gradually came to listen for

the light step upon the gravel path which led through the rose-clad arches to his low-roofed porch.

May was as dexterous and handy as her brother was the reverse, and asked nothing better than to be accorded the privilege of assisting her cousin in the mounting of sketches, the binding of music, or even the re-sorting of nails into the compartments of his neatly-kept tool-boxes.

In his turn, he meted out two hours daily of his carefully hoarded time to his little cousin; and immediately after tea rode up to the Abbey to fetch May for her riding-lesson.

Christopher, who had neither leisure, inclination, nor ability to teach his sister to ride, mounted her very willingly on his favourite pony, and even betrayed at times a certain pleasure in her quickness to learn and her enjoyment of the lesson.

It was the happiest moment of all the day for May when, from the steps of the Abbey, she perceived Anthony on his black horse coming slowly up the avenue towards her. He was always punctual, and she never failed to be in waiting,—a fact which he noted with silent appreciation.

Her secret pride in his height, his commanding presence, his good looks, and even in his invariable gravity, made her heart swell within her as he lifted her on to the old grey pony, which was supposed to be exactly suited to her inexperience.

As they rode away, side by side, down the lime avenue, and through the lanes, or cantered along the edges of the moor, or galloped over the grass rides of the park, Anthony had no idea that the solid and familiar landscape, which he loved, was in the eyes of his companion a fairy world so exquisite and so unreal that she expected it almost momentarily to

vanish away; far less that she regarded his perfectly solid form as that of a figure in a beautiful dream, from which she feared to wake.

He saw in her only the happy simplicity of a child, mingled with the charm of dawning womanhood; and while he appreciated to the full her intelligence, her docility, and her good looks, it did not occur to him that her prettily-composed manner often covered a wildly-beating heart, stirred by that tumult of passionate adoration and hero-worship which goes to the making of a maiden's first love.

Sometimes she rode beside him in the happy silence which first love finds most congenial; at others she talked to him with the unreserve of a child whose confidence has been completely won. So perfect were his qualities as a listener that the fact that Anthony never made a confidence in return escaped her observation altogether. Indeed, it is probable that she would have been rather shocked had he broken the reserve that characterised him.

His statuesque appearance made his silence the more entirely appropriate to his personality; and his extreme gentleness and courtesy set him apart as a loftier being than any other of those who dwelt in the little world wherein May now lived and moved and had her being.

Her grief for her mother, which was but the grief of a child, hallowed those perfect summer days which love would otherwise have made so dazzlingly bright for May, and set the song, which her spirit sang from morning till night, in a minor key. Nevertheless, the tears that she shed as she knelt beside her open window, looking up into the cloudless, starry, midnight sky, were no longer bitter ones, for her spirit had lost the loneliness which is the essence of grief; and

though she uttered her mother's name softly and beseechingly in the summer darkness, and held out her white arms to the unseen, here—where the scents and moisture and fragrance of the West Country garden robbed even midnight of its terror—as she had held them out in that other garden, hung over the abyss in the still and rarefied air of the Swiss mountains, yet it was rather the blessing of her mother's spirit, than its return, that she was craving.

Unconsciously and simply, like a child, May had already accepted the inevitable; and while her present surroundings became daily more familiar, her past was gradually and for ever receding further into the land of memory.

CHAPTER IX

LADY ERRIFF of Kellacombe liked to make a pretence of consulting her husband in any emergency that arose; and he was quite willing that she should do so, provided that she made it sufficiently clear what she intended him to advise her to do, and did not subsequently blame him for the consequences of the decision arrived at during their rather one-sided conferences.

"I have had a letter from old Lady Denys; she writes a wonderful hand still in spite of her age. She is anxious to enlist my sympathy on behalf of her little orphan cousin, who has just come to live at the Abbey with her brother, Christopher Thorverton. It sounds rather pathetic—the brother and sister meeting for the first time like this, because their parents are both dead. He ought to be at Oxford still, Lady Denys says, and she is even younger than he is, and they are both quite friendless and inexperienced. She wants me to call on the poor little girl. I must either go to-day," said Lady Erriff, consulting her engagement-book, "or I can't go for weeks. I suppose I can't very well refuse the old thing?"

"Hum!" said Lord Erriff.

"What do you mean by 'Hum!'?" said his wife reprovingly. "I should like to go if it's only to see the interior of the Abbey. Do you know, I have never been inside that house in my life?"

"Yes, my dear, I do know. You could n't very well have gone there under the circumstances, since, with the exception of a few of his own cronies, who don't count, old Thorverton never asked any one to cross the threshold from the day his wife left him."

"There is no need to rake up old scandals, Tom," said Lady Erriff.

"I am very far from wishing to rake up anything, my dear," said his lordship.

"I suppose your poor brother Jack must have been to blame," said Lady Erriff; "but, after all, he is dead and she is dead, and now poor Mr. Thorverton is dead, too."

"I remember Mrs. Thorverton as one of the prettiest creatures I ever saw," said Lord Erriff. "No one could imagine why she married Thorverton."

"I thought he had forty thousand a year."

"He was a very rich man, no doubt. But he was a disagreeable kind of a fellow, and she was very young. I never liked him. No one liked him much that ever I heard of, except my poor brother Jack," said Lord Erriff, shaking his head. "Well, well—the rights and wrongs of the case will never be known now."

"Why should they be known? It would probably only be very unpleasant for us if they were," said Lady Erriff, in a calm, sensible tone. "I never trusted Jack, as you know very well."

"Yes, dear, I know."

"Though you all said he was so brilliant; but for my part I am never very fond of brilliant people. You never know what they will say or do next, whereas with nice ordinary people you can always be quite sure beforehand, and then one knows exactly what to be at. And whatever it was that separated the

parents it is certain these poor children can't be to blame, since one was only seven and the other only four when it happened. And they must be very well off. I shall go over to-day and see the little girl if you have no better reason than that to offer against it."

"I offered no reason against it, my dear," said Lord Erriff, protesting. His wife's logic still occasionally amazed him, even after nearly thirty years' experience of her methods.

"Nonsense, darling, you can't suppose I did n't know exactly what you meant by 'Hum,'" said Lady Erriff reproachfully. "I wish you would n't prevaricate with me, Tom—I often think it 's growing on you, and you do it quite unconsciously, darling. I know you don't mind my telling you."

Her husband gazed at her helplessly.

If he had meant anything at all, except to gain time for reflection, by the ejaculation in question, he knew that he could not have put his meaning into words. But that she should thus be able, with perfect satisfaction to herself, to translate his thoughts into a definite expression of opinion, filled him with admiration. Also he remembered the amount of old Christopher Thorverton's subscription to the Hunt, and his hope that young Christopher would continue to subscribe as liberally.

"Well, well, well," he said in a soothing tone of diplomacy, "the lad rides very straight across country. Brings rather too much blood into the hunting-field, but that 's the way with your millionaires. I 've spoken to him more than once. Can't say I got much talk out of him." He suddenly recalled Christopher's embarrassed countenance and short replies. "Bit of a cub, but I dare say he 'll improve now. He 's not

had much of a chance. And the Abbey is certainly worth seeing. I think you ought to go, my dear."

"I felt sure you would, when we had talked the matter over, darling," said Lady Erriff kindly. "I think it would be a *right* thing to do,—which is what really matters. And if the girl is at all presentable, I shall have her over here to make friends with Kathleen, and play with Brigit and Nora. All really nice girls are fond of children. Of course she could n't come to our garden party, but she and her brother might very well come over and have a game of tennis now and then."

Lord Erriff had no objection to offer, and Lady Erriff rang the bell, and ordered the car to be ready to take her to Moreleigh at four o'clock.

May had already discovered that Christopher's gruff manner covered a shyness that amounted almost to agony; but she had never realised how much he suffered until the afternoon when Lady Erriff—having duly called upon old Lady Denys at the Manor House—was ushered into the banqueting hall at the Abbey. Here she found the little hostess, surrounded by exhausted cricketers, busily dispensing tea.

It was the custom of the house that both teams should have luncheon on the cricket-field, in one-day matches, and tea in the Abbey; and Chris was fond of maintaining old customs, and especially those which had been instituted by his father. It pleased him secretly that his pretty sister should do the honours; and May was too simple to be greatly embarrassed when she found herself surrounded by men, without a single member of her own sex to keep her in countenance.

She was in fact too busily engaged in making and

pouring out tea to think of herself at all; but to Lady Erriff, who had just had the circumstances of the case explained to her, the solitariness of the little anxious girl in her black frock, among this crowd of white-flannelled men, could not but seem pathetic.

A certain motherliness, which might not have been roused in her had May received her in the formal solitude of an ordinary drawing-room, lent additional gentleness to her already soft and rather drawling voice as she greeted her young hostess.

Also the girl's innocent beauty, the simplicity of her dress, and the modesty of her manner, combined to make Lady Erriff take a violent fancy to May Thorverton.

She perceived at a glance that here was a companion who could certainly do her own three little hoydens no harm.

"I wish Kathleen could put on her frock and do her hair like that," she thought, as she said aloud:

"My dear, I am one of your nearest neighbours, and Lady Denys gave me leave to come over here at once and see you. I hope we are going to be friends. Your brother I know already."

She held out a gracious hand to Christopher, who had not risen upon her entry, but remained petrified, seated on the corner of a table laden with syphons, dangling his legs and fingering his tumbler of whiskey-and-soda.

In response to a nudge from the youth next to him, who was scandalised by his bad manners, young Thorverton now jumped off the table and on to his feet with a nervous haste that caused him to spill half the contents of the glass he held upon Lady Erriff's dress. He made no attempt to apologise, but

stood motionless, his sunburnt face suffused with scarlet, in an embarrassment painful to witness.

Lady Erriff was not pleased, because she had on one of her best summer gowns, and knew very well that the delicate blue fabric would not recover from the drenching it had received, but she was a good-natured woman, and also she desired to make friends with the brother and sister, wherefore she showed no sign of vexation, but only smiled upon the delinquent.

"I attribute the accident to your haste to welcome me," she said, with her gentle, rather foolish, but always kindly smile. "I'm so flattered. You see I've lost no time in coming to call upon your sister. I should not have dared to come so soon," she lowered her voice decorously, "if Lady Denys had not given me leave. But I want Miss Thorverton to know we are all prepared to welcome her so warmly."

"That's all right," muttered Christopher in his gruffest tones.

May could not help blushing for her brother, who stood first on one foot and then on the other, and did not offer his visitor a chair, and crowned the general awkwardness of his behaviour by suddenly lifting the half-emptied glass to his lips and tilting the contents down his throat. He then noisily replaced the tumbler among its fellows, on the massive silver tray beside him, and, turning away from Lady Erriff, studiously refrained from glancing again in her direction.

May tried to make amends for this erratic conduct by uttering her own thanks as warmly as possible, and by leading Lady Erriff to the chair next her own, and serving her prettily and anxiously with tea and cake.

But the knowledge that her brother was behaving

like a boor mortified her exceedingly, and she could have cried with vexation when he presently filed forth with the rest of the cricketers, making no attempt at apology or farewell, and leaving her alone to entertain her visitor in the great Elizabethan hall, where the low rays of the afternoon sun now illumined the deserted tea-table, and the wonderful black oak carvings of the roof and mantel and doorways.

Lady Erriff begged to be shown over the house, and May was delighted to comply with her request, and for the first time felt something of the pride of ownership in her new home.

"Only we never can help feeling, Chris and I, that it ought all to belong to Cousin Anthony," she said earnestly, as she ushered her visitor into the long low black galleries, where the spaces on the panelled walls still testified to the removal of the family portraits.

Lady Erriff had, in times past, frequently expressed this sentiment, but she had no hesitation now in going back upon her previous opinions with the utmost warmth.

"My dear, that is what you must never say. People can't eat their cake and have it. And I don't see why the Denys family should expect to have been extravagant for generations, and yet be able to keep the Abbey on the top of it all. Mr. Thorverton gave a fancy price for it. Besides, your brother is half a Denys by birth, and Thorverton is a much prettier name and easier to spell. And when he's married, and has sons of his own, you would n't like it at all if the Abbey did n't belong to them."

She always spoke with such intense conviction that the foolishness of her arguments often escaped the listener. May, being young, was too much impressed

by the maturity of the speaker, her height and her dignity, the kindness of her pale blue eyes, and the elaborate dressing of her golden hair, to observe the mingled weakness and obstinacy of the pursed-up mouth and receding chin.

She felt that she liked Lady Erriff very much, but that she was not a particularly understanding person, though doubtless versed in worldly wisdom. The impulse to confide in her vanished very quickly, but she was nevertheless grateful, and full of hope in the prospect of making friends with the three girls, whom their mother now described to her in terms which made it almost impossible to gather any idea of their characters or their appearance.

"I am afraid you will find them rather Irish; you see the Garrys were Irish, and it always comes out," she said in a deprecating tone, and quite unaware of the hidden magic in that word, which immediately caused May to conjure up a vision of three witty and sympathetic beauties with black hair and blue eyes. "We always say Kathleen takes after her Aunt Katie, and I think if you knew her Aunt Katie you 'd say the same, but Kathleen is on a smaller scale. Nora is her father's living image, but I forgot, you don't know her father yet; however, you soon will. I don't know what you will think of them. I can't get them to take life as seriously as you and I do, nor to keep their hair nice, and look their best, but these things come with time. Kathleen is your age. Of course, if I had n't married young she could n't have been. But she has n't been brought up in France like you, though on the other hand she is a thorough outdoor girl and plays games, and one can't have everything. I am certain you will be great friends. Don't you think so from all I 've said? And you can be giving

her little hints about her clothes all day, which she could n't bear from me. That is the best of being the same age. I know you 're going to be the greatest help to me. And my two boys will be excellent companions for your brother—they are such dear fellows," —here she dwelt at some length upon the qualities and achievements of her sons, and their anxiety to welcome the new owner of Moreleigh to Kellacombe. "And you must let me call you May, for I am very much drawn to you, my dear. Now I must be going, and I am more glad than I can tell you to have seen the house at last. I shall be able to describe it exactly, in every detail, to the girls, and they will be wild to come and see it for themselves."

"I shall be very glad if they will come and see it," said May, who could not help thinking that Lady Erriff must have unusual powers of observation if she could describe the Abbey in detail to any one, since she had scarcely glanced to the right or to the left, during her slow progress upstairs and downstairs and in and out of the wonderfully furnished bedrooms and wide picture-galleries, but had talked the whole time of herself and her family, and her hopes that May and Christopher would soon become intimately acquainted with both.

Peace seemed to fall upon the great hall, as the last ripple of the visitor's inconsequent chatter slowly died upon the air; and May found herself alone, looking vaguely at the Denys' coats-of-arms displayed on shields, held up by solid oaken cherubs in the lofty ceiling.

From the wide archway, with its black, carven pillars, came the distant sound of the cawing of rooks, borne through the open doorway of the outer hall: a sound very restful, and suggestive of peace, and

summer evenings, and the homeward wending of wearied workers beneath summer skies.

May sank back upon a soft, broad couch, among embroidered cushions, with her hands clasped behind her little brown head, and her blue eyes half closed. She was very tired, for she had been up on the cricket-field since the early morning, watching her brother practising at the nets, in the hot sun; and later looking on at the match, endeavouring to learn to score, and generally making herself useful in such ways as she could. Also she was disappointed, for she had felt obliged, upon the advent of Lady Erriff, to despatch a message to her cousin Anthony, explaining that she would not be able to ride at the usual hour, and an answer had been brought her to the effect that, under the circumstances, the ride had better be postponed until the following day. May had no alternative but to acquiesce meekly in this suggestion; but a quite unwonted sense of depression stole over her after the departure of Lady Erriff; and as she leant back, in the restfulness of solitude and silence, among the cushions of the big sofa, before her waking vision rose the handsome face of her cousin Anthony, whom, for the space of another twenty-four hours, she would probably not behold unless she went to seek him in the workshop.

It was so dear a vision that her childish heart swelled as she recalled each outline of clear-cut feature, each characteristic expression, and the grave kindness of the calm hazel eyes.

She thought of him as a worshipper thinks of a saint, an artist of a statue, a maiden of a hero of romance, and it appeared to her that her cousin was a living embodiment of perfection, far above the ordinary level of human beings; but this very con-

viction made one little human heart ache, and tears slowly gathered in the blue eyes and forced their way through the upcurling fringe of eyelash on to the flushed cheeks.

A quick step on the gravel drive, and the clang of the open-work iron gates, which defended the hall-door steps from the deer, made her start.

Christopher entered breathless, and May met him in the archway.

"I say—I saw the old girl drive away," he said. "D'ye think I ought to have come and seen her off?"

"Oh, Chris, I wish you had! But it does not matter. She was very nice, and seemed to mind nothing."

"Well, I funked it. Besides, I could n't stick her at any price. She seemed to me a frightful humbug," he said apologetically. "Besides, I thought you and she would get on better without me. But I 'm jolly glad she came. Now all the other old frumps in the place will come flocking round you, you 'll see. How did you get on with her? Not that it matters a straw, but of course they 'll follow her lead like a lot of sheep."

He tried in vain to conceal his pleasure in the visit and his eagerness to be assured that his sister had made a favourable impression upon Lady Erriff; and his affectation of indifference would not have deceived a child. May reassured him to the best of her ability, and when she spoke of the invitations Lady Erriff had showered upon them both, his gratification was obvious, though aloud he only remarked:

"I say, you seem to have got round her, eh?" and added with a sudden burst of confidence:

"Look here, I 'm sorry I threw my whiskey-and-soda at her. It was n't really intentional, though it looked

like it. It was that blighter, Johnny Wigram, who jogged my elbow and made me do it. He was frightfully sick about it, poor chap, and apologised no end when we got outside. He 's rather a clumsy oaf, but all right when you know him."

"I thought she took it very nicely," said May, who had not been favourably impressed by Mr. Wigram.

"I expect she felt vicious and did n't like to show it, poor old trout," said Chris simply. "I know I should, if anybody served me such a dirty turn as to spoil my best go-to-meeting frock. I would have offered her a new one, only I was n't sure how she 'd take it."

"Oh, Chris, that would n't have done at all."

"Well, I tell you I was n't sure. But it was decent of her not to kick up rough about it. I should in her place. You would n't. That 's the difference between us. I 'm sorry I have n't any manners."

"You could easily get them, Chris," May ventured to say, slipping her little hand under the sleeve of his blue flannel jacket.

"No, I could n't," said Christopher gruffly, but he did not shake off the hand. "And what 's more, I don't want to. I 'm all right. I only ask to be let alone. I don't want a lot of beastly stuck-up county people fooling about here, so far as I 'm concerned. But it 's different for a girl. And the better you get on with them all, the better I shall be pleased, and mind you cut them all out with your frocks and all that. Only you must n't expect me to do the polite to anybody, because it 's not in my line, see? I never could do the civil. That will have to be your job, and I wish you joy of it."

He filled himself another large tumbler of whiskey-and-soda, and May wished she dared shake her head

at him for doing so, or suggest that he had already helped himself sufficiently often to spirits, during the course of the afternoon. But she did not dare. She sometimes felt that her brother was like a wild colt, now and then coming close enough for the bestowal of a light caress, even while starting nervously under the hand that offered it; and now and then absolutely eluding pursuit, and not to be cajoled into permitting her to approach him at all.

Their moments of confidence were so rare and brief, and his response to any appeal she might venture to make so uncertain, that she could not feel as though it were possible for her to rely upon him with any certainty. On the other hand, his readiness to endure, if not to assimilate, the gross and vulgar flattery of Joe Murch and Captain Sandry, his acquiescence in their subservience to his whims and pleasure, and his acceptance of their abject deference to his opinion, often filled her with a disgust and impatience that tended to lessen, rather than to increase, her natural affection for him.

May was proud as well as loving, and said to herself that she would not compete. She was vaguely, and often irritably, aware that Captain Sandry divined and played upon her feelings on this subject, dexterously turning them to account for his own ends.

When he appealed to her to join in expressions of admiration for a stroke of Christopher's at billiards, or his straight batting at the nets, or the smartness of a reproof he had administered to a trembling groom —who, in the nature of things was unable to reply— May found herself answering in cold and unsympathetic tones quite foreign to her character, and disagreeable even to her own ears; and was conscious that she was being exhibited in an unfavourable light

to the brother for whose love she had yearned, and to whom the language of flattery was so familiar that he was not always able to recognise its fatuity. She knew that to him her response to Captain Sandry's appeals must sound grudging, and her coldness unfriendly, but she could not help herself; and she grew daily more indignant that Christopher's native modesty and common-sense should thus be warped, by constant association with his inferiors in character and his superiors in craft.

"He is too good for them—and yet," she thought, stamping her little foot in helpless vexation, "yet he does not always behave as if he were."

Lady Erriff's reference to her sons filled her with hope that Chris might yet make friends with Tom and Robin Garry, who were, according to their mother, and in spite of their Irish blood, the most attractive young men in the world.

It seemed strange that, though they had never hitherto shown the slightest inclination to improve their slight acquaintance with Christopher Thorverton, their mother should now be so certain that they could hardly restrain their impatience to welcome him to Kellacombe. But May was young and simple, and not inclined to search for difficulties in the way of a companionship she desired so sincerely for her brother's good.

"You will come to Kellacombe with me, won't you, Chris?" she said timidly. "I should like to go, but not to go alone."

Christopher at first refused point-blank to entertain the possibility of accompanying his sister to visit at a strange house, nor did any of her arguments and entreaties appear likely to affect his obduracy on the point, and she was turning away sad and dis-

appointed when he caught sight of the tears she could not restrain.

"Look here, I wish you would n't do that," he said irritably, and yet with a certain softness.

"I—I can't help it. Please, don't take any notice. I must be over-tired or something. Indeed, I never do cry. You can ask Margery," said May, with trembling lips, and she suddenly broke down and wept unrestrainedly. "But sometimes, Chris, just when I think you are so kind, you—you seem to fail me; and I realise I am no use to you, and that I have n't any one in the world to depend on, really. And it takes all the pleasure of being here with you, and remembering you are my own brother, quite away, for the moment."

She leant against the pillar of the archway in which they stood, and hid her face in her little slender hands; but the tears dropped through her fingers, and fell upon her black frock, and glistened in the long red rays of the late afternoon sunshine.

Christopher looked at her and fidgeted with his feet, and cleared his throat, and knew not what to say. The sight of her tears made him uncomfortable, and he hated to be made uncomfortable.

"Look here, of course I 'll come with you if you care so much as all that," he said at last. "Though why you should care, when it must be patent to anybody that it 's you they want and not me, I can't think. Why, I 've lived here all these years, and Tom Garry and his beastly stuck-up brother Bob have barely nodded to me when we met."

"I thought Robin Garry was at Oxford with you?" sobbed May.

Chris fidgeted more than ever, and grew very red.

"You don't understand," he muttered. "They 're

the sort of fellows, both of them, who would n't have been found dead in a ditch with me or poor old Joe. But we need n't go into all that," he added hurriedly. "You stop crying, d'ye see? And I 'll come to the beastly place with you, and if I behave like an owl when I get there, same as I did this afternoon, you remember I warned you beforehand. And I say, if we 've got to go, we 'd best go pretty soon, before that Clow woman and her daughter turn up. Lady Erriff might n't take such a fancy to them as she has to you."

The thought of his promise to pay a visit to Kellacombe weighed so heavily upon Christopher's mind that after his third whiskey-and-soda he became unusually loquacious in the course of a prolonged *tête-à-tête* with Joe Murch on that same evening.

"Women are the deuce," he said dolefully. "They cry, and then you find yourself promising to do a thing you don't want to do, and hate doing, and never meant to do."

"A woman might cry for a year before I 'd promise to do anything I did n't want to do," said Joe Murch very simply; and he helped himself to half-a-dozen of Christopher's finest cigars, and stowed them carefully away in his cigar-case.

"Talking of women, old chap," he said, "if you want me to clear out before these visitors of yours arrive, you 've only to say the word, and my name shall be Walker. I know I ain't much of a ladies' man. But the best of me is I 'm always ready to do a bunk. You and me don't need to stand on ceremony, so you 've only to decide which way it 's to be."

Christopher smoked for nearly a minute before he

replied, and a more sensitive person than Joseph Murch might have considered that the tone of his reply lacked warmth.

"Please yourself," he said laconically.

Joe Murch leant forward and grasped his host's unwilling hand.

"Just like you, old boy," he said ecstatically. "I can tell you I shan't forget the hospitality you've always shown me. You've always got a friend in me, mind that; always—as long as I live."

A tear born of whiskey trembled in his eye, and Chris, remaining in this instance quite unmoved, drew from his friend's display of emotion the correct inference that Joe Murch had no intention of quitting his comfortable quarters at the Abbey for some time to come.

"Poor old Joey," he thought to himself. "It's a pity he's got such a raging thirst on him. If it wasn't for that he might be good for something. However, even as it is, he's not at all a bad old sort at heart."

CHAPTER X

NOW the sun of late July shone on the steep roof of the Manor House, the purple clematis blazed on the porch, and the bunches of clustering white roses, which in France are christened "Bride's bouquets," made bowers about the deeply sunken latticed windows.

Though the June radiance was past, summer held her court of fragrance and colour still. Over the low doorway of Anthony's workshop were flung mantles of old honeysuckles, and bramble roses; and beside the doorpost a grave group of Madonna lilies stood white in the shadow.

A hedge of sweet-peas peeped over the low wall of the vegetable plot, and fanned by the light wind, distributed scents.

It was but a wild little cottage garden, because Lady Denys liked to make contrast, since she could not vie with the stately cultivation of the Abbey pleasure-grounds.

She would not permit the self-sown, white and pink foxgloves to be rooted from the edges of the path, whither they had taken shelter under the low stone parapets in their headlong flight from the surrounding woods. Nor would she allow the ferns and pennywort and snapdragon to be cleared from the crevices of the walls of the terraces, whereon Italian jars of terra-cotta poured forth dangling sprays and masses of rose and scarlet geranium.

Great spikes of sky-blue and violet larkspur, and bushes of Canterbury bells, and stiff heads of gaily-coloured sweet-williams, made the borders bright, and the eschscholtzias opened their glowing orange hearts to the sun, while the blush ramblers made giant wreaths and nosegays of the archways.

The butterflies sailed serenely about the standard roses and sunned themselves on the crumbling cob walls, which here and there were patched with mellow brick; the bees hummed incessantly, and great bushes of heavy fuchsias dangled purple and crimson bells across the narrow pathways.

The deep, deep blue of summer skies was flecked only by the scurrying shapes, in wreathed and dazzling snow, of summer clouds.

Anthony, in his shirt-sleeves, standing against the doorway, in the shade of the broad eaves and honeysuckle tangles, looked at Erica in the sunshine.

He looked only at Erica because, although May was also in the garden, she was at a little distance, standing beside old Lady Denys, whose carrying-chair had been placed in the shadow of an archway, and who was regarding sharply the pair at the entrance of the workshop, whilst she yet laid a detaining hand on the girl's arm.

And for the first time in her life a faint, but unmistakable foretaste of the pain of jealousy stole into May's mind.

Also, she realised that the power of beauty was not, as she had hitherto vaguely regarded it, an abstract proposition, but a very real and potent fact.

That Erica was beautiful she had recognised instantly, and with all the admiration and delight that a warm and generous heart could feel.

May had always accepted her own prettiness as a

matter of course, and when she thought of it at all, thought of it with a guileless and quite normal satisfaction. But she now realised sharply that no one had ever looked at her with the startled appreciation, the arrested attention, which she had already perceived on the faces of the two or three men whom it had fallen to her lot to introduce to Erica.

From her earliest childhood May had been always what the French describe as *très sérieuse* in disposition, which of course does not mean serious, and could perhaps be best translated by the word responsible.

She was simple, and grave, and cheerful, and wise at one and the same time, and had always been treated by her mother rather as a sensible little woman than as a child.

But now she felt—and once more for the first time in her life—as though she were only a little girl, shy, uncertain of herself, bewildered and ill at ease in Erica's presence.

Here was a young woman seven years older than herself, but still to be met on equal terms of girlhood, and subject still, at least nominally, to her mother's authority; who in her cool self-possession, her utter cynicism, her complete disregard of other people's feelings, and her instantaneous and surprisingly accurate appraisement of men and things, might have been, poor May thought, centuries older than Cousin Rosabelle herself.

Erica's brain was as shrewd as it was narrow; but the narrowness had not yet become apparent to May, while the shrewdness confounded her at every turn.

Miss Clow had measured swords with old Lady Denys at the instant of meeting.

The cold and wary light-blue eyes of the girl had

gazed calmly into the piercing, sunken, hazel eyes of the old woman, and Erica's sub-conscious self had cried to her, "Here is an enemy!" and leapt to arms.

May's feminine instinct scented battle even as the two shook hands: Lady Denys in her old-fashioned, flowered delaine gown, with a Cashmere shawl wrapt about her shoulders, and a lace flounced parasol held above the elaborate mound of white puffs and braids that crowned her witchlike face; and the tall young goddess, who was Erica, with the uncovered glory of her red-gold hair, and the glowing freshness of her exquisite pure colouring, daring the sun.

Old Lady Denys took it all in at a glance. The challenge of the collarless muslin blouse, through which the fair, plump shoulders gleamed; the bare white column of the throat, soft and dimpled as a baby's, with little curling rings of glossy down at the back of it, and two delicious creases under the firm round chin; the well-shaped, rather large, ungloved hands, the cheap skirt and ultra-transparent stockings.

She said to herself: "A minx, every inch of her, and bad form into the bargain." But she, too, was impressed by the beauty of Erica, which could thus challenge the morning sun, and shine forth triumphant.

Beside her, it was true, that May, with her slender figure and delicate features, her shady garden hat, and simple black frock, looked like a child, whose very refinement made for insignificance beside that glowing and vivid personality.

Lady Denys noted the fact with a kind of silent rage, for she loved May, and her heart was already full of ambitions and plans concerning her.

She prepared, mentally, a little dart with poisoned tip, and flung it at her visitor.

"I scarcely expected so early a visit, Lady Clow,"

she said graciously, "but my little cousin knows how welcome visitors always are in my dull existence; and you are very kind to come and see me informally like this."

"I am Erica," said Miss Clow, not in the least disconcerted. "And mamma would not have dreamed of doing anything so informal as to call upon you at this hour of the morning."

"I beg your pardon for the mistake," said Lady Denys, with grim pleasure. "I am an old woman, and very blind,"—this she said, though May was well aware that her Cousin Rosabelle still did fine needlework without deigning to wear spectacles. "And I had expected to see another little slip of a girl like May."

"No one could describe me as a little slip of a girl, and I am in my six-and-twentieth year," said Erica, with calm nonchalance, "and I weigh considerably over eleven stone. Probably in a few years' time I shall be double my present size. You have only to look at mamma to see what I am likely to come to."

Lady Denys was vaguely annoyed because she felt that Erica was somehow discounting beforehand all the unpleasant remarks wherein she might presently have relieved her own mind.

"I have not the pleasure of knowing your mamma," she said rather snappishly.

"I suppose it would be for you to call upon her, would n't it?" asked Erica. "Though I don't know much about these things, for I have never lived in the country—only in West Kensington."

"I do not pay calls. I am a great invalid," said Lady Denys stiffly, "and for a long time past I have been unable to visit even my most important and

oldest neighbours. In no case could I therefore have the pleasure of waiting upon Lady Clow, though I shall, of course, be quite ready to receive her here if she cares to come."

"Of course she will care to come," said Erica. "And I think you will probably like her very much." Her manner was singularly dispassionate. "To be perfectly frank, I do not get on particularly well with her myself. We do not understand each other, or else we are not sympathetic. I never know quite which. But most people like her excessively—when they have once got over the first shock of her appearance."

Lady Denys was thunderstruck.

"She is an extraordinarily grateful person, and quite overcome by the goodness of our cousin Christopher, in throwing open his doors to his poverty-stricken relations. She would ask nothing better than to be a mother to May, and guard her from the corrupting influence of my ultra-modern independence."

"I am glad to hear it," gasped Lady Denys.

Erica smiled.

"I don't think mamma was pleased at the idea of my coming over this morning," she remarked. "But I wanted to see Mr. Anthony's workshop, and my cousin May thought you would not mind."

"Oh, you wanted to see my son's workshop?" said Lady Denys. "Well—there he is."

The sound of voices attracted Anthony's attention, and he came to the door of his workshop, foot-rule in hand, with his shirt-sleeves rolled above his elbows, displaying a pair of muscular, well-shaped arms.

Erica scarcely waited for May's timid and apologetic introduction; she stepped forward, and made her own excuses to Anthony.

As they shook hands, their eyes met almost exactly on a level, for Anthony's height was six foot in his stockings, and Erica in her high-heeled shoes measured little less.

"I love this place. It is so sunny and sheltered and picturesque," she said. "Quite as picturesque as the Abbey, though I like a large house, of course, better than a small one." Her distinct and deliberate utterance gave value and authority to every word she spoke.

"May I come inside and see what you are doing?"

"I am making a bench for the laundry," said Anthony with equal gravity and simplicity. "It has to be a very solid one, for it holds two washtubs."

"I did not know gentlemen did such work," she said, without any attempt to conceal her *naïve* surprise.

"They very seldom do," said Anthony, rather drily.

"I suppose you mean they very seldom can?" she translated, accurately divining his thought. "Do you do it for economy or for pleasure?"

The question was robbed of impertinence by the seriously interested expression of the beautiful face she turned towards him.

Anthony was singularly unsusceptible, but he was also something of an artist; and the curve of the full, red lips and the brilliancy of Erica's colouring were altogether too remarkable not to invite inspection. He could not help looking at her; and having looked once, he looked again.

"Both, I think," he said.

"You do not waste words," said Erica, and her lips parted for an instant, displaying the inward-sloping row of even, wholesome, white teeth.

He smiled in reply. Unless Anthony had something to say he said nothing, and as his occupations gen-

erally absorbed his thoughts, and as also he was almost incessantly occupied, his words were necessarily few.

"May I come here again?" said Erica, looking round the cool, dark interior, and noting the piano and violin in one corner of the workshop, the solid writing-table, with its revolving chair, in another, and the skylight, which, by a skilful arrangement of roller-blinds, concentrated its light upon the carpenter's bench which occupied the middle of the floor.

"When you like," he said courteously, but without any eagerness.

She was too wise to interrupt his work by a longer stay. She had produced an effect, and knew it, and now withdrew, with no further apology or farewell than a little nod over her shoulder. But he escorted her up the steps into the garden.

"It is a very interesting place, a carpenter's workshop—and cool," she said. "When one is tired of heat—and people talking—it would be a nice place to rest."

"Perhaps you would give me a sitting, one day," he suggested, struck, as well he might be, by the effect of the sunshine upon her bright hair. "In the garden here, among the flowers, would suit you better than the interior of the workshop. I sketch in water-colours."

"May said you were an artist," said Erica calmly, "and every artist I meet asks me for a sitting. Of course, I shall sit for you with pleasure."

"That is very kind of you," said Anthony tranquilly.

He went back to his work as a matter of course, and May now suggested to Erica that it was almost time to get ready for luncheon, and that it would be as well to start on their homeward walk.

John Youatt was already wending his ponderous

way down the stone steps of the little terraces, followed by his sharp-visaged sister: that lean and muscular virgin who ruled the good-natured giant with a rod of iron, and presented so curious a contrast to him in appearance and character.

"John, he du take after my mother, her being nart but a natural born vule, as cude n't ha' done a day's turn without father tu help she," Ann often said, with simple candour. "Many 's the time has father said to me, 'Ann, 't is yu as shude ha' been the man-child, and Johnny the maiden; for yu be so hard as nails, and he so saft as butter.'"

The pair lifted the chair with the old lady, who was now so light that they scarce felt her weight at all, and bore their burden steadily up the steps and along the pathways into the house, while Erica and May passed out of the little garden and took the short cut across the park to the Abbey.

"I don't think you like me very much, Cousin May, and yet you might," said Erica, looking down at her rather serious little companion with those curiously light china-blue eyes, and speaking with the slow directness that characterised her, "for after all, I am not such a bad sort when you know me, as your brother Christopher would say."

"Have you heard him say that already?" asked May, unable to help smiling.

"Do you think it odd he should have found it necessary to apologise for the presense of Mr. Joe Murch already?" asked Erica with undisturbed gravity. "But tell me, little May, why it is that you do not like me?"

"I did not say I did not like you," said May, colouring all over her fair face; but she was too honest and too brave not to answer her cousin's challenge

more directly. She looked up and met the questioning gaze steadily.

"I think, Cousin Erica," she said, with an old-fashioned childish dignity that became her very well, "that it is a little soon for us to decide how much we are going to like each other. You see, you are my guest, and my brother's guest, and if I did not like you I could not possibly say so. So it is not quite fair to ask me such a question."

Erica nodded appreciatively.

"You are an honest little thing," she said, meditatively, "and that was a fair answer and straightforward. I hate humbug. But there is no harm in my saying that I wish you would like me, is there? Or that I wish that you would tell me what there is about me that makes you not quite sure that you do—although I believe you want to?"

May's ingenuousness was not proof against this appeal.

"I want to," she said simply, "because before you came I thought of you and your mother living together, alone and rather poor, as you say you are, and it reminded me of mamma and me. And also because I don't know any girls, and hoped to find a friend. But now you are here, I find it a little difficult—to—to get accustomed to your being so very"—she hesitated—"so very unreserved—if you will pardon me for saying so. I should not have dreamed of saying such a thing if you had not asked me."

"I quite see," said Erica. "In some people I agree my methods would be too odious, but I always think I can carry it off."

She looked at May, and May could not find it in her heart to deny that Erica's pose—if it were indeed

a pose—did, in some strange manner, suit her personality.

"Also," Erica continued reflectively, "I find that to tell the exact truth, in and out of season—which is what I pride myself on doing—is the best way to deceive people."

"But why should you wish to deceive people?" said May, astonished.

"It does not deceive honest people, but it baffles fools, and liars, and knaves, and all my enemies." said Erica calmly.

May lifted her puzzled face and candid eyes.

"I do not understand, and I think it sounds horrid when you talk like that," she said. "And why should you have enemies?"

"Can't you guess why?" said Erica, still gazing steadily down upon her.

May grew suddenly scarlet.

It appeared to her that Erica's eyes pierced her soul, and discovered that hidden pain of aching jealousy which had lurked there from the moment of Anthony's first meeting with her cousin. She felt remorseful, ashamed, guilty.

"Yes, I suppose I can guess why," she faltered. "If people were mean enough to be—to be envious of your being so very, very good-looking as you are. But even if they were—if they could n't help it, I mean—they—they would n't be your enemies."

"*You* would n't," said Erica, and she smiled with her lips though not with her eyes, and hummed a popular air from one of the latest musical comedies. And May's spirits suddenly rose a very little, because it was a great, though quite unconscious, relief to her feelings, to discover that Erica sang out of tune.

Christopher was standing on the hall-door steps as

they crossed the open space before the Abbey, where the deer were couched in the shade of the great Spanish chestnuts.

Generally he came in, hot and breathless, and late for luncheon, and dashed upstairs to change just as May was going into the dining-room. But to-day he was spick and span, in spotless white flannels, with an immaculate black tie, obviously waiting for his sister and their visitor to return.

"I say," he burst forth, "don't you feel that hot sun, with nothing on your head, and not even a parasol?" He looked with undisguised admiration at the burnished coils of hair wound around and about Miss Clow's handsome head. "I suppose all that hair keeps it off," he said bluntly.

"I like the sun, and I never burn," said Erica, who was conscious that a slight shade of tan added to the richness of her colouring, and intensified the whiteness of her throat and arms. "But it will be nice to come into the cool house and rest; and nicer still to have some luncheon."

Her stately form preceded the brother and sister into the house, and Chris lingered for a moment with May.

"By Jove, is n't she a ripper?" he said. "I never saw any one like her, did you? To think I wanted to go over to Kellacombe before she came! That was a good 'un, was n't it? I 'm jolly glad we were put off. Why, if old Mother Erriff took such a fancy to you, I wonder what she 'd say to Erica, eh?"

May wondered too. In her heart lurked some doubt as to whether Lady Erriff's opinion of Miss Clow might not coincide with that of Lady Denys, which May had not found it difficult to divine.

But she would not dash her brother's enthusiasm

by any betrayal of her doubt, and, side by side with her jealousy, there lurked also a curious feeling of vague pity for her cousin Erica. But the wherefore of this May could not have explained, even to herself.

No one in the world who had not known that Miss Clow came straight from a very uncomfortable cheap and dingy London lodging, to visit her cousin Christopher's country house, would have guessed that she had not been accustomed to enjoy every luxury and comfort under the sun, that wealth could provide.

For in the course of a very few days she permitted herself to criticise her surroundings with characteristic frankness, and to make suggestions for their improvement without the slightest hesitation.

She complained of the western aspect of her palatial bedroom, and her young host rushed to the housekeeper and rated the astonished Mrs. Foss soundly. He reproved her because she had not put Miss Clow into the historic state apartment which was the showroom of the Abbey, and to which it appeared the young lady had taken a fancy; as also to the carved and gilded fourposter whereon his sacred Majesty, Charles II., was held by tradition to have slept, during his sojourn at Moreleigh.

She asked for strawberries, and when the head gardener pointed out that the strawberry season was over, Christopher threatened to dismiss him for gross neglect of duty, and asked what the hothouses were for, if not to produce strawberries in and out of season.

She ordered Captain Sandry about, and sent him errands as though he had been one of the underfootmen; and after a moment's hesitation, and a

second glance at his employer's lowering brow, the agent thought it safer to obey her slightest behest with alacrity, saving his own countenance, to the best of his ability, by assuming an amused smile, which imposed upon nobody, and least of all upon Erica herself; who took a cruel pleasure in his humiliation, thus revenging herself for the boredom his unceasing flattery of his employer entailed upon her.

For this cause alone would Cloberry have grovelled at her feet, even if she had not chosen to be particularly gracious to him, and if he had not been dazzled by her beauty, her imperiousness, and her utter disregard of other people's feelings.

"That 's my idea of a perfect lady—treats them all like dirt under her feet. Miss May 's nought but a baby beside her," he said exultantly to Mrs. Foss and Margery, thereby intensifying their natural dislike and distrust of Miss Clow.

Erica's mother, bewildered, apologetic, and deprecating, panted conversationally, as it were, in Erica's wake, vainly trying to explain her away, and always baffled in the attempt.

She was driven to confide in May, who was always kind and respectful to her, and for whom the poor lady soon conceived a great affection and gratitude.

"Why, why could I not have had a daughter like you, my dear," she wailed. "Who would have understood me, and whom I could have understood? I often wonder where Erica's odd disposition comes from. Not from me, I am sure, and her poor father was the mildest of men. But when she was only two years old she preferred sitting on her high chair to being held on any one's lap; and at four, because I did n't give her a lump of sugar, she put my knit-

ting in the fire, needles and all, and when I asked for it told me triumphantly it was all burnt up! I could not have believed such wickedness, if I had n't seen the charred bones, and smelt the singed wool. And I shall never forget how she sat on her little stool, looking like a cherub dropped from Heaven, and smiling at my horror and dismay. There was always something uncanny about Erica, and I may safely say that from her earliest infancy I have never had the slightest control over her."

Lady Clow's complaints were not entirely reserved for May, mainly because the poor woman's mind was so full of her grievances that it overflowed in every direction. When she called at the Manor House at a conventional hour, and escorted by Captain Sandry (whom she found a very attentive and nice-mannered person), Lady Denys, metaphorically speaking, turned her guileless visitor inside out, and knew all about Erica, and her mother, and her father's ruin, and most of the symptoms of the illness which eventually killed him, within half an hour.

"She is a poor, harmless creature," said Cousin Rosabelle to May, who came in the pony carriage which was Christopher's latest present to her, and fetched Lady Clow away at an appointed hour. "But I am more at ease about you, now that I know she is at the Abbey, for though it is true she could never set the Thames on fire, it is also certain that the very presence of so stout and motherly a woman must be a protection to you. And I told her that you and Christopher ought to go over to Kellacombe with Anthony, and call at the earliest possible moment. And that it would be the height of bad manners for Miss Erica to take it upon herself to accompany you there on your first visit."

"Dear Cousin Rosabelle, if Erica wants to come to Kellacombe she will certainly come," said May smiling, but rather pale. "No one in the world could prevent her, and Cousin Jennifer least of all."

CHAPTER XI

ERICA was a great deal too wise to go to Kellacombe with Christopher and May, though her host entreated her to do so, and explained that he had ordered the phaeton for the express purpose of driving her over there.

"If I had wanted to go at all, I should have preferred to motor," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "Horses are so fearfully slow. But I am certainly not going to call on Lady Erriff. She can call on mamma and me if she likes, but I hope she won't."

"You are like me, and hate calls and callers," said Chris, delighted.

"I am not in the least like you, and it depends on the callers," said Erica calmly. "From all I hear of Lady Erriff I fancy she must be a bore. But you might invite her sons and daughters over here. You can go over and call on her with May this afternoon, as you suggest, and I will give Mr. Anthony a sitting for my portrait, as I promised."

Christopher's fair brow became overcast, and the sullen lines of his mouth were intensified.

"Anthony was to come with us."

"You will get the visit over much more quickly without him," said Erica yawning. "He is such a very slow and deliberate person. And I particularly want to have a portrait of myself."

"I can get an artist down from London—a real artist—to paint you if you want that," said Chris-

topher, reddening. "Something better than an amateur like Anthony." Then he added hastily, as though with a touch of generous shame, "Not but what old Anthony's pictures are jolly decent—only, you see, I 'd rather counted on his pulling May and me through this beastly visit."

Erica turned her lovely face towards him, and opened her thickly-fringed, light eyes to their fullest extent.

"I think you are rather selfish, Cousin Christopher," she said, and, rising from her seat, walked very deliberately the whole length of the hall, without turning her head, and left him alone.

Christopher was wretched.

He rang for port wine and biscuits, this being the form of consolation to which he was growing daily more accustomed to turn, in moments of disappointment or vexation, and he swore at the head footman because he was not Cloberry, and at Cloberry himself when he did come; and when Joe Murch burst suddenly and noisily into the hall, to tell his dear old pal that a glorious rat-hunt was going on in the granary above the stables, his dear old pal flew into a violent passion, and said it was a hard thing that a man could never be left alone for a single moment in his own house, and that he should build himself a lodge at the other end of the park, and go and live in it, if this sort of thing went on much longer.

Christopher was still a boy, and a spoilt boy; behaving like a spoilt child at intervals.

Joe Murch, who had meant to ask him for a much-needed loan that morning, flung away in a rage, muttering apologies under his breath, which turned into words not in the least apologetic when he was out of hearing.

He met Captain Sandry in the drive, and warned him, in a sudden burst of confidence, that Christopher was in a dangerous mood.

"Young cub. I don't know why I should put up with his infernal tantrums," he said savagely. "It 's all very well for you, Sandry, you 've thrown in your lot here and can't help yourself. But I 'm a free-lance and it ain't good enough."

Captain Sandry looked at him with scarcely concealed contempt. He knew that he could not in the nature of things expect to be Christopher's only friend and companion, and, this being so, was content that his rival should be one whom no sober man in his senses could reasonably fear. He despised Joe Murch for the remnant of honesty which made it difficult for him to subdue his temper in consideration of his interests; and for the fact that he had a weak head, which was easily and generally confused by his habit of constant nipping. What did it signify whether Christopher were cross or the reverse, since his conversation would in no case ever have really interested Captain Sandry; he found it as easy to laugh good-humouredly at a snub as at a sally. It was all in the day's work, and one way and another the day's work brought the day's wages to Joe Murch, as surely as it did to himself.

"About that wine order," he said in his soft, mincing tones. "Thorverton suggested to me last night that we might as well place it with your man, as I told him the price-list you gave us compared quite favourably with that of his father's wine-merchant. Of course, it is understood that the quality of the wine——"

"That 's all right," said Mr. Murch, uneasily conscious that Captain Sandry was sneering at him. "I

guarantee the quality of the wine; the chap 's a friend of mine. He knows I 'm a judge," said Joe gravely. "And look here, Sandry, I want to be perfectly fair——"

"My dear Murch, I don't pretend to be such a judge of wine as you are; I leave it to you. It 's none of my funeral," said Captain Sandry. "You never interfere with me—and I should be sorry to interfere with you."

"You 're a good fellow, Sandry," said Joe Murch, who felt dimly that he was no match for Christopher's agent, and desired vaguely to propitiate him. "A d—d good fellow. And mind you, I shan't forget it. Look here, I 'm just going to punt back to the house to get a drink—I suppose old Christopher won't grudge me that—" he interpolated bitterly, "and then I 'll join you. I suppose you 're going to the stables?"

"No, I 'm busy," said Captain Sandry, who did not care much for Mr. Joseph's company even when the sun of Christopher's approval was shining full upon him, and desired it less than ever when he was out of favour.

The brother and sister started for their drive in almost equally low spirits.

For some time Christopher scarcely spoke, except to utter a savage admonition to the off-side horse, who was inclined to pull, and thereby afforded him legitimate cause for an annoyance which he was not slow to indulge.

But when the pair had settled down, and no longer occupied the whole of his attention, he displayed a desire to converse with his sister.

"It 's a bore Anthony could n't come," he said, with an elaborate indifference that did not impose upon

May for a moment; "but, after all, it would have been selfish of us to drag him off to pay a beastly call, a thing any sensible man would jib at more or less, and he might make rather a nice picture of Erica."

"Yes," said May doubtfully, "I like his landscapes better than his portraits."

"I offered to have an Academy chap, or some one of that sort, down to paint her," said Christopher, in an off-hand way, as though this were an attention the most ordinary guest might expect. "But I suppose she thought it would n't be worth while, when Anthony had offered to do it for nothing."

"I think it would have been very much worth while. She would make a beautiful picture," said May sincerely.

He was unable to conceal his pleasure.

"Perhaps you might persuade her to let me then, later on," he said eagerly. "It was a good idea, was n't it—asking her and her mother to stay with us? Cousin Jennifer 's a good old sort, is n't she?"

"She is very kind indeed."

"I think it 's rather nice to see the terms they 're on. So unlike most mothers and daughters," said poor Christopher, looking rather anxiously at his sister, as though hopeful that she would find something to commend, even in the manifestation he understood least of Erica's strange personality. "No ceremony or anything stiff. Her mother never dreaming of taking the hump, and Erica just saying whatever comes into her head."

"She certainly does that," said May, marvelling at the fatuity of a young man in love.

"And you are friends, are n't you? It has made life more cheery for you, has n't it, her being here?" he asked wistfully.

May could not bear to disappoint him in her reply. She believed, in her heart, that a far more bitter disappointment than any which she could inflict was in store for her brother; whose entire subjection she witnessed with a depth of resentment which is usually reserved for the mother or sister of the victim, in such circumstances.

"It has certainly made the house far more cheerful," she said bravely. She winked away an involuntary tear, which would steal to her eye, as the mental picture of Erica among the flowers, in the shelter of sunny walls in the Manor House garden, presented itself—Erica, resting comfortably in a wicker-chair, scantily draped in her blue *voile* gown, with her golden red hair gleaming in the afternoon sun, against a background of lilies and white phlox and green leaves, while Anthony studied in silence every line of her beautiful face and stately form.

Erica knew how to be silent too. She could enjoy the sunshine like a white Persian cat, resting among the cushions, with half-closed eyes, and the blue just glinting through the thick golden fringe of eyelash. Her every pose was instinct with sleepy grace, and Anthony was an artist, though as May had truly said, rather a landscape than a portrait painter. His specialty lay in depicting, in faithful miniature, the West Country landscape, with its blue distances, and foregrounds of red plough and rich blossom.

"I wonder what they'll find to say to each other?" said Chris, unconsciously voicing the thought that oppressed his sister's mind.

"He never speaks when he's painting—at least, not to me," said May, who had accompanied Anthony once or twice on sketching expeditions, as she had been wont to accompany her mother; sitting by his

side, and occupying herself with needlework or a book.

"Does n't he? But that will be rather dull for her, surely," said Chris, with a sound of eager hope which would have made her laugh had she felt less deeply on the subject. May thought with a pang, that held less of scorn than of pain, that she would not have found it dull to sit with Anthony in silence. His very presence always filled her with happy dreams.

She wondered, with a dull aching in her childish heart, whether Erica, too, was dreaming, as she sat in the sunshine among the flowers in all the pride of her beauty, for Anthony's eyes to feast upon at leisure.

Lady Erriff received the brother and sister with open arms and eager welcome, scarcely troubling herself to listen to their apologies for Anthony's absence, and expressing no regret for it whatever. She led the way into the garden, where, under an immense spreading cedar, her entire family were assembled about the tea-table.

One young man, who was Robin Garry, was lounging in a gaily-coloured hammock, slung from one of the mighty arms of the tree, and a little sister sat cross-legged on the grass beside him, reading. The eldest son, Tom, was also absorbed in a book, and had also a little sister in close attendance; she leant over the back of his wicker-chair, and read across his shoulder: her long, silky brown hair falling about her flushed face and rounded shoulders. Kathleen, the eldest daughter, who was grown-up, sat in the swing, with one foot doubled beneath her, and the other dangling. She was playing with a black kitten, which chased the little foot when it touched the ground,

and leapt at it bewildered when, like a brown bird, it flew away into the air.

Lady Erriff, emerging suddenly from the shrubbery, with her two young visitors following in her wake, startled this group and scattered it almost simultaneously. She sent Brigit to the house to order tea, Nora to look for her father, and her sons to bring a further supply of chairs.

Kathleen remained. She jumped lightly from the swing, and advanced shyly to greet May, who was struck with her curious unlikeness to her mother in appearance, speech, and manner.

She was a very slight and unformed little creature, with bright dark eyes, and black hair, fine and soft as silk, parted in the middle of her small head, and knotted in a most unfashionable and very becoming knot in the nape of her little brown neck.

Though her skin was brown, it glowed, however, with health and transparent colour; and though she was shy, and silent in her mother's presence, she had a most attractive merry, sparkling little face; and her peculiarly coaxing and musical intonation at once proclaimed and vindicated the nationality which her mother had deplored, to the amazement and indignation of May.

Lady Erriff looked taller, and her eyes more colourless, and her open lips weaker than ever in the presence of this sparkling little brunette, whose irregularity of feature counted for nothing, being lost in the general effect of her whimsical charm.

Kathleen was, as her mother had said, a thorough Garry; and her brothers and sisters also appeared to resemble their mother in no single particular, as May observed when they gathered round the tea-table. They were all Garrys, and all more or less like their

father, as she also observed when Lord Erriff, newspaper in hand, and protesting audibly, came across the lawn, led forcibly by his daughter Nora.

He was short and slight of stature and build, with a pair of beautiful soft, long-lashed brown eyes, set oddly in his weather-beaten face, which was small, and brown, and wrinkled as a monkey's.

He looked like a jockey and a sportsman, but also like the merry, kindly little gentleman he was, and May found herself immediately, and quite strangely, in sympathy with him and his family.

Tom and Robin were considerably taller than their father, and both were so good-looking that it was the family custom to deplore the fact that the boys had stolen all the traditional beauty of the race.

Tom was sensitive on the point, and cherished the moustache that was to conceal, as far as possible, the almost feminine delicacy of his profile; while he went near to shaving his head in his anxiety to eliminate the curl in his hair. But Robin had no such scruples, and illustrated the family tradition of beauty in his own person with supreme and simple satisfaction.

Christopher, after the first agony of shyness—when he tripped over a cushion, kicked the kitten, and begged its pardon simultaneously—was taken in hand by Lady Erriff, and found himself placed in comparative comfort next her, since she saved him all trouble of talking by never ceasing her own flow of chatter. On his other side sat the long-legged, black-haired Nora, who was frankly absorbed in cake and bread-and-butter, and not inclined to embarrass him by paying him any attention at all.

The young people, however, made no progress towards intimacy during the meal, for the devastating

wind of Lady Erriff's conversation passed over the field of possibilities, and scorched each hesitating growth.

When she observed that May and Kathleen were entering upon a low-voiced conversation, she begged them to speak up, and declared that if they exchanged views she was sure each would find the other extraordinarily sympathetic. She assured both that they would be intimate friends in no time, which reduced them to silence, and almost caused them to form a natural resolution to the contrary, though as a matter of fact, each was attracted by the other.

Under cover of her husband's conversation with May, good-naturedly designed to cover her embarrassment, Lady Erriff then whispered to Christopher that she could read his sister like a little book, and that May had had a nice long talk with her the other day, and that she was a fanciful little creature who needed a man's strong guidance and ought to marry young. Dwelling emphatically upon this quite imaginary flightiness of May, she raised in Christopher's simple mind a doubt of his sister's common-sense, on which he had hitherto, by heaven-born instinct, relied implicity.

As they rose from the tea-table, she told May that her son Robin was a gambler on the Stock Exchange, and a regular man about town; and it was some time before May could shake off the impression, thus unintentionally created, that in financial matters Robin was not a person to be altogether trusted.

There is, perhaps, no more potent mischief-maker than the amiable and well-intentioned talker who is also a fool; and all the harm that Lady Erriff could do in one short hour she did with great satisfaction and delight to herself, and without a single suspicion

that her voluble confidences were calculated to disturb the harmony she was so anxious to establish between her own family and her young visitors.

May wondered at the meekness which Lord Erriff displayed towards his wife, and even when Christopher told her later that their host was a very poor man, and that what money there was—which appeared not to be much—belonged to Lady Erriff, she was still not sophisticated enough to understand why an obviously intelligent and rather witty man should, therefore, suffer himself to be swamped, as it were, in the torrent of his wife's generally pointless conversation. But she had a certain shrewdness in spite of her folly, and was, besides, a kind-hearted woman, as her frequent visits to Lady Denys proved; though she had not sufficient acumen to perceive that her endless flow of gossip and chatter fatigued her neighbour.

"I want to speak to you, Tom," cried his wife, calling after Lord Erriff, as he murmured something about leaving the young people together to become better acquainted, and took up his newspaper with the intention of leaving the tea-table; and he waited for her obediently.

May thought that the husband and wife presented an odd contrast as they moved away together across the lawn: Lady Erriff, tall, thin, and stooping, and her lord's uncovered black head scarcely reaching her pointed chin.

"Christopher Thorverton wants the boys and girls to go over and dine," she said. "What do you think?"

"Is n't it rather soon for a dinner-party—a house of mourning?" he said doubtfully.

"My dear Tom! There is no question of dinner-parties. How could Nora and Brigit go to a dinner-

party? And he has invited them all. A handful of young people dining together without any formality whatever could not be counted as anything. It is not as if you and I were going. Then, I grant you, it would be most improper. But, as it is, no one would know anything about it. The five children would just motor over together and motor back."

"As you think best, my dear."

"But what do you advise?"

"I advise you to let the young people settle it among themselves," said Lord Erriff, with a twinkle in his eyes. "By the way, that is a very pretty little girl. Not in the least like her poor mother, however. A serious little creature, with nothing frivolous about her; but very pretty, all the same. Looks like a lily among all our little darkies, eh?"

"She is exactly the sort of girl Robin ought to marry, I made up my mind the moment I saw her," said Lady Erriff, resolutely. "I should want Tom to do better. Of course, as an eldest son, he can marry any one he likes; but Robin wants a little capital if he is to get on, and a wife would steady him. I shall take the first opportunity to put it into his head. I 've already told Christopher his sister ought to marry young, and, of course, with that fortune, he will make a handsome settlement. I shall be very firm about that, and so must you, Tom. And that will help to bring him and Kathleen together. I should be quite satisfied to see Kathleen mistress of Moreleigh Abbey. After all, it is the finest house in the country."

"Hum!"

"Always, 'Hum!'" said Lady Erriff, annoyed. "If you knew how difficult it is to marry girls in these days, you would be thankful to have a millionaire planted at your very door. And Kathleen is very

peculiar. She hates London, and pretends not to like dancing. And no one can deny that Moreleigh Abbey is a beautiful house."

"I am the last to deny anything of the kind, my dear, and I promise to be as thankful as you can wish when he has offered the place to Kathleen and Kathleen has accepted it. But if I know anything of her, not even the prospect of reigning over the Abbey would induce her to marry such a cub as poor young Thorverton."

"That is all nonsense, Tom," said Lady Erriff, uneasily. "He is not a cub at all. I took a great fancy to him at tea, and we had a nice long talk."

"I heard you," said Lord Erriff drily.

Tom and Robin now escorted May to the lake where they proposed to row her across to the island which was its principal feature, and whereon stood an arbour chiefly remarkable, in their eyes, because it had been constructed by themselves. With all her might she endeavoured not to draw invidious comparisons between her brother and the two young Garrys.

But she could not but note the contrast presented by their pleasant, low, well-bred voices and perfectly natural manners, with the noisy and undisguised vulgarity of Mr. Joseph Murch, and the yet more irritating affectation and gentility of Captain Sandry, who mistook his own cockney accent for a careful rendering of English, and had no idea how his speech jarred upon May's ears, when he took pains to say elaborately, that he was *bo-ered,* and remarked that, out of respect for the memory of Christopher's father he should wear *mou-erning* for another month or *mo-er.*

She realised now, as never before, how great an

irritant to her nerves, and how restraining an influence to her natural gaiety, had been the enforced association with these two favourite companions of her brother, during the past months; and, in spite of her loyal resolve to refrain from criticising Christopher, she blushed for him when she heard an echo of Captain Sandry's obsequiousness in the tone of his conversation with Kathleen, varied by a distinct reproduction of Mr. Murch's odiously familiar attempts at chaff in his efforts to be facetious with little Brigit.

Christopher was too young and too simple not to be imitative.

"But it is n't the real Christopher—only what they are teaching him to be. If only they taught him nothing worse!" she thought, passionately defending him in her own mind. But she looked round with cheeks that burned, at the sound of the loud laugh with which he pretended to be about to upset the boat, into which Nora had stepped. And as she looked she marked that his young face was already coarsened by perpetual indulgence in alcohol, in contrast to the clear eyes and wholesome complexions of the young Garrys, whose appearance spoke of perfect health and clean living.

She marked also the breadth of Christopher's square-built, thick-set figure, beside those slim, boyish forms, and felt that she would have been proud of her brother's superior strength, had it not been made manifest in unnecessary roughness; for the boy had come to despise refinement of speech and manner, and to mistake rudeness for manliness, under the influence of the insidious flattery which was his daily portion.

It was true that Anthony's example was always before him; but Anthony was not his contemporary,

and also stood in a manner aloof and apart, not given to the proffering of advice unasked, nor to interference in matters which did not actively concern himself. Christopher resorted to his cousin sometimes, as to an oracle, and valued Anthony's rare utterances in proportion to their rarity.

His mind was essentially commonplace, and it is in the essentially commonplace order of mind alone that familiarity breeds contempt.

Perhaps Anthony, in his calm wisdom, which was not the wisdom of books, was aware of this fact. It was certain that his tone of even and indifferent courtesy had kept Christopher at a respectful distance even in his earliest boyhood, and that Christopher had never dreamed of displaying before him the ill-temper which he exhibited almost daily in his own home, and before his own intimate associates.

May realised, with a kind of faint dismay, that it was not very wonderful if Tom and Robin did not show any particular liking for Christopher, and that Kathleen's tone towards him was ever so little distant in its kindness and politeness. The perception tended rather to increase her passionate loyalty to her brother, and determination to stand by him and on his side against the world. Nevertheless, she was wise enough to know that it was to his interest that she should encourage a friendship with the Garrys and bring, as Margery had entreated her, attractive young people about the place, to make better company and examples for Christopher than his own ill-chosen associates could ever be.

She did not, however, realise how deep was the amaze of the young Garrys in discovering that Christopher Thorverton possessed such a pretty, charming, and well-mannered sister, nor how willing they were

to improve their acquaintance with him on the strength of this discovery.

Perhaps her look at Christopher held more of entreaty than she knew, for he subdued the loudness of his laugh, and the insistence of his chaff, and returned to what was, after all, his natural manner, as he sculled Kathleen and her two little sisters in the wake of the first boat. May's spirits returned, and she was able to enjoy the pleasantness of the motion, and the coolness of the air upon the water. Her escort presently elected to land upon the island, and she sat down upon the bank, in the sunflecked shelter of a leafy oak, and looked across the glassy surface of the lake—skimmed by glistening dragon-flies, and danced over by innumerable midges—to the outskirts of the woods upon the mainland. The motionless rushes were reflected in the waters, wherein dipped the boughs of chestnut and birch, and she could just discern the white cocktails of the rabbits that scuttled across the mossy paths which, here and there, were cut through the bracken, and looked as though they must lead direct to fairyland.

The two young men vied with each other in paying attention to their pretty guest, and from their conversation and wordy battles, intermingled with laughing appeals to her better judgment, she learned, incidentally, that Tom, the elder and graver, was a Grenadier, and that Robin had been destined to become a lawyer, like his distinguished grandfather, the first lord; but that he had joined a firm of brokers, to the disappointment of his family, and his own pride and satisfaction.

He tried in vain to induce May to express approval of his choice of a profession.

"Can't you see the nobility of the thing?" he asked

reproachfully. "The younger son slaving to make money for his family, knowing well they are all as poor as Church mice? Does not the romance appeal to you?"

She shook her fair head inexorably.

"To be a great lawyer, and to plead in court, and make eloquent speeches, *that* I understand," she said, "but money-making is not romantic."

"My dear Miss Thorverton, it is the most romantic thing in the world. Imagine being able to control, for instance, by a single nod of your head—a touch of a finger upon a telegraph wire—all the wheat markets in the world."

"You are not by any chance mixing yourself up with Rockefeller, or somebody of that sort?" suggested Tom sardonically.

Robin ignored the interruption, fixed his soft brown eyes on May's face, and continued to plead eloquently the cause of the financier in his low, persuasive tones, until she laughed and coloured, owning that there was something to be said for the romance of his calling, too.

"But you have made me still more certain that you would have been as great an advocate as your famous grandfather," she said prettily.

"What price Grenadiers now?" said Robin, with schoolboy triumph to his elder, and was disconcerted by the fire and earnestness of her interruption.

"I never compared *either* to a soldier," she cried indignantly. "That comes first of all."

Then she met Tom's eyes and blushed, and laughed a little, because his embarrassment equalled his pleasure, and because he stroked his slight moustache gravely in the effort to cover both. In some strange way, May felt herself older than either of the young

men, who were nevertheless her seniors by several years.

The island was explored, and the arbour admired, and then it was discovered to be late, and Christopher's invitation to the whole party to come over and dine at the Abbey was renewed and accepted.

As the brother and sister drove home together, they found the state of their spirits considerably improved.

"After all, it was n't so bad. That Kathleen is a pretty girl, though not a patch upon Erica," said Christopher, "and those fellows did n't give themselves such airs as I expected. I think old Lady Erriff would like you to marry one of them."

"Oh, Chris, do not say such things!"

"Why not? You 'd be a jolly good catch, I can tell you. There 's not a girl round here who 'd be a better. I 'll see to that," said Christopher in defiant tones. "It would be a good joke for you to be Lady Erriff one day, after all Cousin Rosabelle's prophecies that I don't know how to take care of you. I wonder what she could do for you better than that? And you are just the sort of girl who ought to marry young," said Christopher gravely, and to the amazement of his sister, who was not aware that her brother was merely quoting Lady Erriff.

CHAPTER XII

ERICA sat for her portrait.

No breath of air stirred in the garden of the Manor House, and the distant landscape was misty with the heat.

The pungent odour of a Spanish chestnut—whereof the leaves fell continuously on to the grass bank beside the lawn—oppressed her senses, and the ceaseless humming of the bees, which thronged in myriads about its countless, colourless spikes of blossom, made her drowsy.

The background Anthony had chosen for her was that of a high, sun-baked, stone wall, where the peaches, beginning to colour, repeated faintly the tints of the beautiful face, with its halo of glorious hair.

Below the peaches the sunflowers glowed, and the first dahlias heralded autumn. The hollyhocks spread forth petals of rich rose and palest yellow.

"Can I rest for a moment?" she said. Her deep voice took a plaintive note, and the inference was that Anthony, selfishly absorbed in his work, had let a weak woman suffer until outraged nature rebelled.

But Anthony, who was guided entirely by the clock, replied, unconscious of offence; and even with a slight betrayal of surprise:

"It is only three-and-twenty minutes since your last rest. We agreed on the half hour. But if you are tired, of course we will stop at once."

She raised herself very slowly from the creaking

wicker-work chair, and lifted her shapely arms above her head, with her favourite gesture and her favourite yawn.

A man who was all artist would have seen in the magnificence of the pose, the graceful outline of the beautiful limbs, the abandon of the movement, only a perfect study in fatigue; but Anthony was three parts artisan, and above all things punctual.

Moreover, he resented her unrestrained and prolonged manifestation of weariness as discourteous. His classic features assumed an air of severity and cold politeness, to cover his displeasure. He drew a comparison in his own mind which was not favourable to Erica.

"Do you make it a rule never to talk to your sitters?" she asked, with an air of charming impertinence.

"I am afraid I am not a sufficiently accomplished artist to be able to talk while I am painting. My work is poor enough, even when I have devoted the whole of my attention to it."

"Let me see what you have done," she said abruptly, and walked round his easel.

Anthony had methods of his own in painting as in most of his pursuits. He worked almost in miniature. The background of his sketch was touched in with great delicacy, and very faintly tinted, while the figure in the foreground was drawn with the utmost care and finish. The face had been stippled in so finely that attention was concentrated upon that and the brilliant colour of the hair.

"If you touch it you will spoil it," she said, and her tone was gratified. "It is really very clever, and a good likeness, and delightfully flattering."

He protested politely, but his manner thawed as

she continued to praise the picture, and in the end he said:

"I am glad you are pleased. I think it is more successful than anything I have ever done, in the way of a portrait, such as it is."

"Are you going to give it to me?"

"Certainly."

She felt the shade of coldness again, and exclaimed:

"You don't like me to ask for it!"

"It was my intention to offer it to you," said Mr. Denys, in a voice from which expression of every kind was banished. "That is my practice, with the few people who have been kind and patient enough to sit for me. I would have liked to finish the sketch a little more highly, but perhaps,"—he put a touch or two, very deliberately, into the background,—"perhaps you are right, and this would be better left as it is."

He looked at his watch again.

"Will you come into the house, and allow my mother to give you some tea?"

"I was n't thinking about tea," she said pettishly.

"No. It is not due for another quarter of an hour," said Anthony patiently, "but as you are tired of sitting, I thought it might be a change and rest. But perhaps you would prefer to walk up and down here, while I put away my things."

"Can't your things wait?"

He did not appear to hear. But perhaps this was only because he found it impossible to explain to her that nothing short of an earthquake would have induced him—having finished his work—not to return the implements of his labour to their appointed places. He carried away the light easel, on which he was accustomed to rest his sketch-block from time to time;

and the folding table which held his paint-box, and glass of water, and the little heap of many-coloured rags, wherewith he wiped his brushes, and cleaned his china palette.

May would have understood by instinct the necessity of indulging habits so regular, and have helped him to carry these various treasures into the workshop, and to stow them away in silence and safety. But Erica watched him with an impatience she did not care to conceal.

On his final and prolonged disappearance, she thought fit, however, to swallow her resentment, and with careless-seeming air, to follow him into the comparatively dark interior of his den.

She found him stripping the sketch off the block, with the aid of a palette-knife, and to all appearance so absorbed in this occupation that he scarcely noted her entry. An open despatch-box stood ready to receive it.

"You said you were going to give it to me," she said rather crossly, and held out her hand.

She stood beside his elbow, so close to his side, indeed, that her blue gown brushed the sleeve of his shooting-coat.

Anthony met her eyes with baffling gravity and unconsciousness.

"If you will allow me, I shall have the pleasure of mounting it and framing it before I offer it to you. It will look much better so," he said, and laid the little sketch carefully in the tray of the open despatch-box. He shut down the lid and the Bramah lock snapped.

Erica turned away.

"I will go up to the house and see your mother, if you wish," she said, with a meek intonation.

"It will be very kind of you. She is lonely, and I am sure a visit from you will be a pleasure to her."

"She must have felt leaving the Abbey?"

"No doubt."

The brevity of his reply was discouraging, but Erica was not easily repelled.

"And you—to whom it should have belonged—you must have felt it, too?"

Anthony paused perceptibly before replying, and then answered in rather measured tones:

"We are speaking of what happened a great many years ago. Are you ready? Shall we go now?"

Erica turned upon him impetuously. Her beautiful face was flushed, and angry tears glittered in her eyes.

"You are determined to keep me at arm's length, but I will say what is in my heart," she cried passionately. "I feel all the time that the Abbey ought to be yours. Why don't you try and get it back? How can you sit down here contentedly playing with hammers and nails, and painting and framing little bits of pictures, and fiddling old tunes and mending old tubs, and doing odd jobs that any village carpenter could do for you—when you have health and strength and brains and breeding, and looks beyond the dreams of common men, with which you could conquer fortune, and bring the world to your feet if you chose, besides buying back the home of your fathers from that stupid lout of a boy——"

She had thought by the suddenness and fire of her onslaught to surprise him out of his composure: to break up that steady calm which irritated her so intensely in all her converse with him.

But she had not counted on the force of Anthony's gentleness. A man who habitually thinks before he

speaks is master of his utterances even when he is taken by surprise, for the habit of self-control, like any other habit, asserts itself involuntarily.

The unexpectedness of her attack did not shorten his accustomed pause before reply.

"You must not think of me as being an ambitious person at all," he said quietly. "I am very happy over my little jobs, and have no desire to return to the Abbey. Now, shall we leave the discussion of these abstract questions, and come and ask my mother to give us some tea?"

Erica looked at the severely noble and handsome face, and was for once silenced.

She was also humbled, feeling that Anthony had disdained even to bestow upon her the rebuff she had provoked and desired, since it would have given her at least the claim of a grievance. But there was nothing to resent. He had chosen to ignore her impertinence because his good breeding was founded upon something higher than pride.

In his grave hazel eyes she could see only kindness —or was there also pity? She buried her face in her hands, and the vision of herself—beautiful, contrite, drooping, before the man she had tried to stir into anger, since she could not move him to love—beat upon her brain.

As she made that supremely natural gesture of shame and contrition—with an abandon that was rendered only touching by her beauty—the thought flashed across her, "Am I acting still? But I feel like this. Did he guess that I was acting before, and is that why he is sorry and not angry?"

She dropped her hands, and behold! Anthony was no longer watching her.

His back was turned towards her, and he was lift-

ing a long, narrow strip of white enamelled wood from a shelf across the farther end of the work-table.

"This is the moulding I have selected for the frame of your picture," he said serenely, "and it can have either a white or a gold mount, whichever you prefer."

Lady Denys looked up sharply as her son ushered Miss Clow into the low-ceiled oak parlour, where, as usual, she sat in state beside the open, latticed windows.

Anthony's tranquillity, and the disconcerted expression which Erica, with all her *sang-froid,* could not entirely subdue, made her aware that this young woman had suffered defeat of some kind, and the conviction put her into good spirits.

"She has been trying to get Anthony to flirt with her over the portrait painting. Poor thing! I wish her joy," said the old lady grimly.

She felt, under the circumstances, that she could afford to be gracious to Erica, for she did not bear malice because the girl had had the better of her in their first encounter. On the contrary, she was inclined to respect her adversary.

Also, the gossip which filtered to the Manor House from the Abbey, by means of the excellent Mrs. Foss, who visited her former mistress constantly, had informed her of Erica's high-handed proceedings there, and of the manner in which she bullied its owner, ruled her mother, and snubbed the agent.

Lady Denys was too much amused to share the sorrowful indignation of the old housekeeper. She preferred even impudence to meekness and want of energy, and had shaken her head over May, whose influence upon her brother was so slight as to be imperceptible to an outsider.

"Little May is too gentle; her spirit is too delicate to cope with the state of things at the Abbey. She is, besides, too innocent and too young. This girl is made of coarser fibre, and is far better suited for the job. But what does she mean by running after Anthony, with his six hundred a year? I suppose she is an insatiable coquette," thought the old lady, looking critically, but with an admiration she could not altogether disguise, at the statuesque figure seated opposite her.

"Physically," said Lady Denys to herself, "a more perfect mate for Anthony could hardly be imagined. It is as though all the colour and warmth and energy which he lacks had been concentrated in her, whilst the refinement and nobility she will never possess are almost exaggerated qualities in him. And they are both extraordinarily handsome, in quite different ways."

Anthony waited upon his mother, and upon their guest, with his usual courtesy, and the deliberation of his every movement betrayed the utter tranquillity of his spirit, whereas the deliberation of Erica was an assumed and studied pose, belied by the lightning quickness of her retorts, and the keen, wary alertness of her light-blue eye.

When the enquiries after the progress of the portrait had been made and answered, and when Anthony had promised that his mother should see it, to the best advantage, as soon as it was framed, Lady Denys asked politely after the health of Lady Clow.

"Mamma is all right, but this unusually prolonged heat has made her quite unable to walk. She spends most of her time panting in the shade, with Christopher's Newfoundland dog beside her. He finds the heat trying, too. Mamma is terrified lest one of these

days he will go mad, in consequence, and bite her. She offers him water at regular intervals, making ready to fly the moment he refuses to take it."

Lady Denys smiled.

"It is a long time since we had such a summer. I am very thankful it should be a fine one, since it will probably be my last."

This was a perennial remark, which Anthony had learned to ignore, but Erica said, with polite indifference, "Oh, I hope not!" and Lady Denys glanced sharply at her.

"What time do you expect Christopher and May to come back?"

"I never expect any one till I see them. Why should they hurry? It will be much pleasanter coming home in the cool of the evening."

A little more small talk of the kind passed, and then Anthony remarked, with a glance at the Dresden clock on the old black mantel: "I think, if you will excuse me, I will go and look after some work I have in hand."

"You generally go at this hour, my dear," said his mother, drily.

Erica did not offer to take leave. He nodded a pleasant farewell to her and to his mother, and made a civil speech of thanks to Erica for her kindness in sitting for him.

Then he opened the door, stooped his handsome head to the low portal, and was gone.

The girl sat motionless, with her chin resting on one hand, and the other absently crumbling the biscuit on her plate, and Lady Denys was not well pleased with her, regarding both her easy attitude and her silence as proofs additional of her lack of good manners.

"I am afraid you must find it dull work, sitting alone with an old woman like me," she said, with a certain acidity. "You must not stay on out of politeness now that my son is no longer here to amuse you. I am quite accustomed to solitude, and have learned not to dislike it."

"I would rather stay a little longer, if I may—if you don't mind," said Erica, lifting those strange, thickly-fringed eyes from her plate, and fixing them upon the old woman's shrewd, inquisitive face. "I think I was rude to you the other day, and I want to apologise," she said slowly.

Lady Denys was taken aback, but not moved by this unexpected frankness. She looked suspiciously at her visitor.

"That was quite a long time ago," she said.

"I wish I could think you had forgotten it."

"I still have my memory, my dear. I do not suppose you meant to be rude. Young people nowadays are free-and-easy to a degree which was unheard-of in my youth. I suppose it is the fashion in some circles. Pray do not trouble yourself to apologise."

The response was not all that Erica had hoped.

"I do not know whether I meant to be rude or not. It is just my way," she said, shrugging her shoulders, "to say whatever comes into my head."

"A dangerous habit," said Lady Denys.

She watched the girl narrowly, and said to herself, "I wonder what she is driving at? This *accès* of frankness does not deceive me in the least."

Erica smiled.

"You see, I pride myself on speaking the truth. It is my only virtue," she said, and perceived, to her chagrin, that she was coming near to boring Lady Denys in her self-analysis.

The rich colour flooded her face, and again the light eyes filled with tears. The sensation of personal mortification was new to Erica. She was accustomed to dominate easily the little circle in which she had moved with her mother. Here, there was something intangible in the atmosphere—an indifference, a lofty reserve—which made her somehow ill at ease. She was restless with a desire to prove her superiority, because for the first time a secret doubt of it assailed her.

"I spoke truth out of season to Mr. Anthony just now," she said, and Anthony's mother became alert, betraying her reawakened interest to those watchful eyes. "I asked him how he could be content to waste his life pottering over a handful of shavings in a workshop, with the great world outside open to him. If I were a man," said the girl breathlessly—and now she sat up straight, and looked into the face of Anthony's mother, with flashing eyes, and clasped her white hands together—"and, above all, if I were a man with every physical and mental gift, and the good luck to be the possessor of an ancient name into the bargain, I would never rest until I had conquered fortune, and won back my own house, and made myself a power in the land—and I told him so."

"It was, if you will allow me to say so, very impertinent of you, my dear," said Anthony's mother, but her heart beat faster under the lace kerchief crossed on her bosom above the flowered delaine gown, and her dark eyes glittered. "What did he say?" she demanded rather breathlessly.

She had long ago ceased to shed tears over her son's lack of ambition, and the days were past which she had rendered miserable to both by her scoldings and entreaties and lamentations. She looked curiously at this girl, who had taken it upon herself

to waste the storm of her feeling upon the rock of Anthony's gentleness.

"What did he say to you?"

"He might have snubbed me; for I was, as you say, very impertinent," said Erica in low, dejected tones. "But he did nothing of the kind. He did not even put on the cold manner which he generally assumes when I ask troublesome questions. He let me down gently. Even took me into his confidence, to lessen the blow to my self-respect which his own was obliged to deal me. He just told me simply that he had no ambition, and did not want his Abbey back, and was very happy in his little jobs."

"Yes, he is very happy," said Anthony's mother. She forgot to be on guard, as it were, over her feelings, and groaned. "He does not care. It is quite true. He has never cared."

"Do you think—it is possible—that any one—any one—could influence him to—to feel otherwise?" Erica asked, almost in a whisper.

"I used to think—some woman might—if he loved her," said Lady Denys, in almost the same tones. She answered mechanically, and as though she were not thinking of Erica at all, but whispering her thoughts aloud. "But the years have slipped past, and I think so no longer. He has taken his catechism literally. He is content to do his duty in that state of life unto which it has pleased God to call him."

"He is not young, he must have loved—somebody," said Erica, with a kind of soft abruptness.

Lady Denys looked at her, with eyes still dazed from that looking backwards through the years to her hopes for Anthony, which had withered with his youth and perished in his manhood. Then she recovered her self-possession.

"I am not in my son's confidence in such matters," she said stiffly. "If I were, it is hardly likely that I should speak of his affairs to a stranger."

"I did not mean to offend you," said Erica humbly.

She relapsed into another reverie, and this time Lady Denys did not resent her silence.

"I suppose she is in love with Anthony," she thought, and the thought somehow softened her, and the more so, because she believed such love would be hopeless. "She is trying to insinuate herself into my good graces because she imagines I should resent his marriage with a penniless outsider, and an adventuress if ever I saw one—though I don't know that I ever did see one before. God knows how I should have resented it in days gone by. But not now—not now. It has come to this—God help me—that I would welcome Anthony's marriage with almost any woman who loved him. She must love him, or his ways would drive her mad, and he would be miserable if he had to change them greatly. This dairymaid of a woman has brains if she lacks breeding—and health, and beauty, and spirit—and would bear him magnificent children, if appearances are to be trusted. Well, fate must decide. If she gets her way I shall be very much surprised, but angry I shall not be. She must fight her own battles. I am too old to interfere one way or the other."

Erica rose with a little sigh, put her white hands up to her head, and absently tightened the heavy coils of red hair that were bound about her brow. Then she shook the scanty folds of her blue gown about her shapely form, and Lady Denys, watching critically the lazy strength displayed in every movement of her supple limbs, sighed over the recollection of her own past activity and lost youth, and thought,

with a strange pang of self-pity of the crippled, shrunken, helpless old woman, who was now herself.

"You can come over here to the Manor House when you like," she found herself saying almost involuntarily. "Life is sad enough, and Heaven forbid that I should interfere to make it sadder for anybody; and especially anybody who is young, and should be happy. You can come when you like—not that you would wait to be asked."

"But it is very kind of you to ask me, all the same," said Erica.

She stepped forward and lifted the old lady's hand to her lips, and kissed it.

Lady Denys found the action theatrical, and rather resented it. "A false touch," she said to herself impatiently. "She does not really feel it."

But she was wrong; for a ray of odd sympathy with Anthony's mother had somehow pierced the thick shell of Erica's egotism, and she had expressed it thus to the best of her ability.

She recognised the eternal discontent that looked out of the dim, tired eyes; for the same fire was consuming her own soul.

"This is what a woman comes to who has made a failure of life—disappointments, poverty, loneliness; and nothing to do but to wait and wait and wait for the end," Erica said, almost fiercely, to herself. "That woman had as much spirit, and as much energy, and as much ambition, and as many wits to work with as I; and opportunities that I have never had—until now. She must have been beautiful, for it is from her that Anthony has inherited his features. Yet, somehow, she has let everything slip by her, and come to this in the end. What possessed her—what foiled her? Was it—love?"

She looked at the closed door of Anthony's workshop as she walked, with stately step and head erect, past his mother's window to the door in the garden wall. "Was it because she let her heart rule her head—when her chance came?" she said. "But that is what I will never do."

CHAPTER XIII

ABOUT sundown, Christopher and his sister returned, and found Erica in the hall. The boy asked her eagerly if she would come and see the young pheasants fed.

She agreed with a graciousness that set his heart beating, and to complete his satisfaction, May pleaded fatigue, and left him to escort their guest alone to the woods.

There was a grey mist rising, after the oppressive heat of the day; and the coolness of the evening was not yet.

The keeper walked down the long glades, whistling softly, strewing feed from his great wooden basket, and the young birds came running out of the copse, with here and there an anxious mother-hen at their heels, and here and there a lordly cock-pheasant strutting across the path.

The low light of evening shone through the trees, and Erica caught glimpses of the great park, studded with mighty beeches and oaks, stretching away in perspective into the grey distance.

They left the keeper at a parting of the ways, and the stillness of evening became apparent, and the loneliness of the woodland path through which Christopher led her. She knew that she had only to put forth a hand to take into her own keeping this young man and his great possessions, and she thought of the

discomforts of the Kensington lodging, and wondered why she hesitated.

Her love-affairs had not been few, and chances of matrimony had presented themselves. Here a poor young clerk, there a penniless curate, or hard-working doctor—these were the valueless prey who had been caught in Erica's toils, coldly scrutinised by their snarer, and allowed to depart, more or less the worse for the experience. But no such prize as Christopher had ever fallen to her lot, because she and her mother, being poor and of no account, had moved in obscure circles, where wealth did not dwell. A few months ago marriage with so rich a man, and so important a landowner and personage as Mr. Thorverton of Moreleigh would have satisfied the utmost ambition of Erica's soul; but her outlook upon life had widened since she had come to stay at the Abbey. In her visit there she perceived an opening through which she might presently step into the great world of which she had dreamed, and which she had supposed it impossible that she should ever enter; for the limitations imposed upon her by her mother's poverty had been painfully apparent to Erica.

Her prudence, which now and then, in the watches of the night, counselled her to make sure of Christopher, was tempered by the courage of the gambler, who suddenly perceives chances beyond his wildest hopes, unfolding themselves in every direction, around a sober certainty.

She realised that her present position, as an honoured guest on an indefinite visit in one of the largest houses in the county, afforded her opportunities which might lead to greatness. That the opportunities would be the outcome of Christopher's generosity did not trouble her conscience at all.

She had had, as has been said, some experience in such matters, and was comfortably aware of the blindness and humility and generally desperate fidelity of first love. Having regard to the facts that she was older than he, and not handicapped by the slightest predilections for him, she thought it probable that his love would survive the trials to which his trust and his patience might presently be put. In other words, she meant to cage the bird in hand, while she stole forth secretly to enjoy the chase of the two who might be lurking in the bush.

Her ambition led her to desire a more distinguished place in the social world than the plain appellation of Thorverton could give her; her personal fastidiousness made her reject the mental vision of Christopher as a husband; and the consciousness that the vision of Anthony, in the same relation, was by no means so displeasing to her imagination, also inclined her to delay.

On the other hand, she bade herself remember that Christopher—unlike those other youths, whose first love she had analysed and rejected—was a spoilt son of fortune, accustomed to the instant gratification of every whim, and dowered with a certain aggressive strength of obstinacy, which she uneasily suspected, though she had not yet had occasion to measure its force.

She glanced at him as he walked beside her, through his own woods, so happy and so pitifully unconscious of the thoughts that were passing through her brain; and as she glanced she realised that her feelings towards him held something of actual aversion.

She compared his slouching gait and thick-set figure, the heavy lines of his sullen face, and coarse, yet insignificant features, the lack of breeding betrayed

by his every mannerism, the commonplace observations, couched in schoolboy slang, which were all he had to offer in the way of conversation, with the grave and noble personality of Anthony—Anthony, who could never be otherwise than dignified, even while he toiled, in his shirt-sleeves, at humble jobs which, according to her taunt, the village carpenter could have accomplished as well as he.

Erica had never before come across a man of Anthony's type, and she had had the wit to recognise its charm, and the grace to appreciate it.

Also, he was the first man she had met, in the limited ways of her short pilgrimage, whose character altogether baffled her. Guile she understood, but sincerity she could not fathom.

She found it hard to credit that he could be speaking truth when he had told her that he did not care whether or no the Abbey belonged to him. It would have been easier for Erica to believe he was engaged in some deep game of waiting, which would presently be made clear to her superior intelligence.

And yet . . . the faint voice of Erica's stifled soul, striving to make itself heard through the gross web of material imagination and scheming, which her busy brain had spun around and about it, bade her reverence that which she could not understand in Anthony Denys.

"I am growing sentimental," she said angrily to herself, and broke the silence, which to Christopher was fraught with such infinite possibilities, by a demand that called his spirit back from the land of happy dreaming in which it was wandering, almost unaware.

"Did you ask the Garry family over to dine, as you intended?"

"The Garry family?" he stammered, looking up at her, with dazed eyes, for she was taller than he.

"I told you to ask them," said Erica, with cold displeasure.

"I know—I'm stupid. I was thinking of something else," he said apologetically. "Yes, of course I asked them. The little girl, Kathleen, is rather jolly. She's going to bring her banjo. She's a pretty little thing. I think you'll like her," he said eagerly.

"Fool!" ejaculated Erica mentally.

"The kids are coming too. Jolly kids," he went on, vaguely perceiving that he was not giving satisfaction, and not exactly knowing why. "And Tom and Robin are not such swells as I expected. In fact, they were rather decent. I thought—I don't know why—that they'd put on side or something. They're a bit older than I am, and Tom's in the Guards."

Erica knew the ages of Tom and Robin, for the excellent reason that she had looked them up in the peerage, and was aware that both young men were more nearly her contemporaries than Christopher. She had wished to ascertain whether or no they had accepted the invitation which she had inspired, and she had felt unable to make any inquiry upon the subject in the presence of May.

"When are they coming?"

"On Thursday, if that suits you," he said timidly.

"The whole family? Sons and daughters, and father and mother?"

"I never asked the old folks. Ought I?" he said in dismay. "I say, I'd best write a letter, had n't I? Or get May to; she writes an awfully good letter. I only said the young ones, and quite informally, to

play games after dinner, though I 'm sure I don't know what kind of games you want to play."

"It would spoil it all if the old people came. You did quite right," said Erica decidedly, and he breathed freely again.

"The old man 's a brick. Awful jolly little beggar. And she means to be kind," he said. "I don't suppose they want to come. I 'm glad you think it 's all right."

He stopped and hesitated, and growing very red, burst forth suddenly as though in desperation:

"You know I only want to please you, Erica. I—I don't know how it is—but I do care more about that than anything in the world."

He looked straight before him as he spoke, but through all the agony of embarrassment which beset him, a very passion of sincerity was manifest. Erica's vanity, which had received a certain chastening from the experiences of the afternoon, was gratified.

"I thought I had forbidden you to talk like that."

"You may forbid me as much as you like," said Christopher doggedly; and in his tone she detected a hint of that purposeful obstinacy which had once or twice rather alarmed her in him, and made her wonder how far her influence with the spoilt boy would survive his sure possession of her. "I shall tell you I love you whenever I get the chance, because I want you to know it, and because I see no reason for hiding it. I don't care if the whole world knows it. I know very well"—his repetition angered her vaguely—"I know very well it 's very unlikely that you 'll ever care for me in return. Anybody who saw us together would laugh at the idea. D 'ye think I can't see the difference between us—an ugly, stupid clumsy chap

like me, and a beautiful girl that could marry any one she chose, like you?"

"I don't like a man to be good-looking," said Erica softly, but her heart contracted in scorn of her own untruth as she uttered the words, and the image of Anthony's grave and beautiful face seemed to look at her sternly.

"Don't you?" said Christopher. "Don't you, Erica?" His tone was rather wistful.

"Why should I?" she said absently. "There are other things more important."

Christopher looked at her again, and this time with the shrewdness that sometimes permeated through his apparent stupidity.

"Of course, if I 'd got nothing to offer you besides myself," he said simply, "I should n't be such a fool as to think of it at all. But you like the old place, and that 's always something; and if you did n't mind, taking an ugly chap like me along with it—that would always let you do as you liked," he stammered—"so long as you 'd be contented to live here, as I hope you would, for I don't think I could stand living in London; in fact, I 'm sure I could n't," he added suddenly, with a caution that displeased her.

"I should n't make bargains with you beforehand about where I was to live, or anything else," she said haughtily. "If I married you at all—but you take a great deal for granted, and are going a great deal too fast, since I have not yet suggested my willingness to do anything of the kind—but if ever I did marry you, it would not be for your money, Chris."

"I say—I never thought of that. I never said that. You 're making me out an awful cad," said the boy flushing.

"You said something very like it, and a great deal

more than I wished to hear," said Erica sharply. The afternoon had tired her, and when she was tired, she was, like many women, inclined to be irritable.

Christopher's light brows knitted themselves above his dark-blue eyes. The natural simplicity of his character, the business instincts he had inherited from a long line of hard-working tradesmen, and the baleful self-importance created by the flattery which had been lavished upon him from earliest childhood, all struggled within him, and combined to irritate the temper which had been too long his master.

"After all," he said sulkily, "I don't see what you've got to complain of. I'm paying you the highest compliment I can. And I don't see why you should be so down on me as you are. I've a right to make you the offer, it's for you to take or to leave——"

Erica turned on him with flashing eyes, and the mien of an insulted empress.

"How dare you?" she said. Her face was eloquent with the reproaches she did not utter, and her aspect of disdainful fury cowed the boy in an instant.

"Erica! Erica! I didn't mean it!" he cried.

"Don't dare to follow me," she said; she was not merely acting, for she was really angry, and almost alarmed that Christopher should get out of hand, even for a moment, like this. She turned from him, and went away alone through the woods, towards the house.

"Don't dare to follow me."

He did not dare. He stood looking after her; his heart filled with self-reproach, and his sullen lips trembling.

"I'm a brute and a cad, after all," said Christopher to himself. "I've insulted her, and she's

staying in my house. I suppose she'll go away to-morrow."

He cursed himself, feeling as a boy feels, that such a misunderstanding must be final, and that since he had unconsciously displeased his divinity, his dream of love must be at an end for ever.

Joe Murch could not have chosen a more unfortunate moment to come whistling cheerfully through the woods, leading the white bull-terrier pup that was the pride of his cockney soul.

"Hallo, Chris! Wad yer doin' out here, ol' man?" he cried, in that strange phraseology which appeared to him specially adapted for the expression of deep affection. "Bayin' the new moon? I bin turnin' over my money, and wishin' myself luck."

He hooked his arm into Christopher's, and Christopher shook it off savagely.

"I wish to God you would n't drag that beastly dog of yours through the coverts," he said angrily. "If you 've been asked not to once, you 've been asked not to a thousand times."

"Ol' man, ol' man, I got him on a string," cried Joe, in heart-broken tones of anguished pleading.

"I don't care a d——n what you 've got him on," said Christopher. "If you can't do as you 're asked I wish you 'd take yourself off altogether, as you 're always offering to——"

Joe's purple face, under the combined influence of alarm and anger, began to whiten here and there in patches.

"If I 'm outstayin' my welcome, ol' man," he said tremulously, "I 'll go to-morrow mornin', and take poor Bingo with me. A nod 's as good as a wink to a blind horse. But I did n't think you 'd round on an old pal like this, Chris."

Christopher's wrath subsided, as suddenly as it had blazed forth.

"Look here, old chap, I don't mean to be a brute," he said, "only something—something happened to put me out and I vented it on you. It was n't quite square of me. I 'm sorry. Best thing you can do is to leave me alone. I shall be all right presently. But just now I 'm not fit company for any one, that 's a fact."

"Ol' man," said Mr. Murch, in a burst of emotion, "say no more. I 'm the last man in the world to bear malice. Only, I can't bear to leave you moping out here like a sick rabbit. Take my advice and come and have a drink. That 's what you want. So do I. You 're feeling slack because the day 's been so beastly hot. A stiff whiskey-and-soda will make a different man of you——"

Christopher was going to refuse, but the mention of whiskey-and-soda reminded him that his throat was parched and his mouth dry with the emotion to which he had given way.

He suffered Joe Murch to take him by the arm and lead him by a back way into the house, without further protest.

CHAPTER XIV

MAY'S happiest hours of solitude, in the little kingdom of the Abbey, that was only nominally hers at the decree of its young master, were spent in the capital which was her own.

Immediately after her arrival at Moreleigh, Mrs. Foss had presented her with the key of her mother's boudoir, which the housekeeper had had in her safe-keeping, it appeared, through all the years of her lady's absence.

The room was octagonal, possessed a fine outlook over the park, and was situated in a kind of adjunct, or tower, above the now disused justice-room.

Upon first entering this sanctum, May had been overcome with awe and sorrow, for these unfamiliar surroundings were yet everywhere reminiscent of her mother's personality and tastes.

But presently she learned the little room and its contents, as it were, by heart. The perfect love and trust that had existed between her mother and herself made her fearless in her explorations among the books and other treasures which she found there.

The wide, cushioned window-seat—whence she could overlook the park, and the herds of white and fawn and dappled deer, and the blue hills of distance—became her favourite retreat; and here she was constantly curled up for hours, reading, while Lady Clow slumbered peacefully in the morning-room, and Erica went motoring with Christopher.

Mr. Thorverton had not been a reading man, and Christopher never opened a book. The contents of the library, which had been collected by the Denys family, had been purchased wholesale by his father; but the most modern volumes therein belonged to the eighteenth century, and May was too young to be attracted by tomes so venerable.

But here, in delicate casings of white woodwork, lurked exquisitely-bound editions of almost every representative author of the nineteenth century, matter sufficient to occupy her for years, and much that was necessary for her education.

She had the cases of her mother's water-colour drawings unpacked, and by the advice of her brother, employed an expert to hang them to the best advantage, upon the white-panelled walls of the sitting-room that was now hers.

May felt herself at home indeed, when a glance at any one of these pictures could transport her in spirit to those dear, familiar, beautiful places, hallowed by many associations which they represented so faithfully.

She counted herself fortunate in that her boudoir was on the first floor, close to her bedroom, and approached by a little separate narrow stair of winding steps, so that intrusion therein without special invitation was scarcely justified.

Lady Clow's rotund and spreading figure could hardly have passed the narrow opening of the short spiral approach, and she showed no inclination to make the attempt. Erica came seldom, for she cared nothing at all for books, and had little to say to May, though she was always perfectly civil and amiable to her hostess, and occasionally even affectionate.

"She 's as artful as they make them, and as impudent. The head housemaid 's almost wore out wait-

ing on her," said Margery. "But not one of us, high or low, as dares to cross her, for 't is plain as the nose on your face, Miss May, as poor Master Christopher 's head over ears in love wi' she. Marning, noon, and night she be leading of him on, and he like a babe in her hands, poor bye! And the only thing as puzzles us all is, why for they 're so long a courting? What are they waiting vor?"

"Because she does n't want to marry him, dear Margery. She likes staying here, but how can she fall in love with Chris? He 's only a boy, younger than she is, and besides——"

"Don't tell me, my child," said Margery, "as knows that she and her mamma have n't a penny to bless themselves with, as I will say the poor lady makes no secret of it, and sews all the day, making and mending for her darter as never does a hand's turn for herself."

"Oh, Margery, every one is not thinking of money! That is the mistake you old people always make. You forget there is something else that matters so much more," said little May, smiling kindly upon her nurse, with all the infallible wisdom and secret conscious superiority of youth.

Lady Clow was quite as much surprised as the rest of the household at the tardy progress of events; but she was presently enlightened, in some measure, as to the reason of Erica's purposeful dallying with the situation.

"Not a dinner-party, of course, but a few young people dining quietly together, and no one knowing anything about it," Lady Erriff had repeated; and May—mindful of Margery's advice, and of her cousin Rosabelle's entreaties that she should put her own

inclinations aside, and not stand in the way of her brother's enjoyment—consulted anxiously with Mrs. Foss, and made every preparation she could think of for the amusement and entertainment of her guests.

Cloberry explained to her that it would be at once simple and fitting that a special messenger should be despatched to London, to purchase the latest drawing-room games and puzzles, and Christopher seconded the proposal; but in their anxiety to provide quiet and suitable occupation for their coming guests, the brother and sister had omitted to reckon with the hoydenish propensities of Brigit and Nora. At dinner these young ladies were fairly quiescent, having been severely snubbed in advance by their elders during the drive from Kellacombe; and admonished to behave by their brethren, of whom they naturally stood in far greater awe than of their parents.

Also, the depression of Christopher—who had not realised until he marched into dinner with Kathleen that Lady Clow would be sitting on his other side instead of Erica—somewhat infected the spirits of the whole party; and at first only the excellence of the *ménu* prevented Tom and Robin from wishing that they had not come.

The consciousness of her host's gloomy and jealous observation constantly bent upon her, and her fear lest a sudden outbreak of his ungovernable temper might result in an unpleasant scene, exercised a restraining influence upon Erica's converse with Tom Garry. The provocative manner, which usually characterised her, was subdued entirely; and Tom, being at once a Guardsman and an eldest son, was struck and charmed by her obvious unwillingness to enter upon a flirtation with him.

As the dinner advanced, and the glamour of her

beauty and the excellence of his host's champagne exercised the usual effect upon his imagination, he became almost desperately anxious to enlist her wandering attention; and after the manner of young men, grew more and more confidential and desirous to talk about himself.

Erica did not drink champagne, but she was by no means insensible to the charm of young Tom's quick-wittedness, his good looks, and evident admiration of herself. But when she perceived that her coldness was the magnet which attracted him, she talked to little Nora, who was on her other side, with a persistency that maddened Tom, and conduced largely towards the soothing of Christopher.

Kathleen Garry meanwhile was reduced either to making conversation with Lady Clow across the table, or to listening to Joe Murch, who was entertaining Brigit with a loud and spirited account of the rat-hunt in the granary; a topic at once highly congenial to her and pleasing to himself.

As his methods were discursive, and his imagination sufficiently lively to admit of much added variety of detail, and an extraordinary expansion of results, he succeeded in surprising his credulous, but not altogether inexperienced, listeners; and as this was also his aim, he was very well contented with himself.

After dinner May proposed to show the house to her visitors at Kathleen's request; but they got no farther than the ball-room. Here, Brigit and Nora—having loudly suggested that they should dance, as soon as the men left the dinner-table, and having been reproved for the suggestion by their elder sister—were consoled by finding several large wooden boxes, containing spare rackets, tennis-balls, croquet-sets, and

the like, piled in the recesses of the French windows opening on to the lawn.

Regardless of Kathleen's protests, and encouraged by Erica's smiles, they started an impromptu game of cricket on the polished floor of the ball-room; and the noise of the cries and shrieks of laughter, echoing across the lofty spaces, speedily attracted the gentlemen, who were perhaps not sorry for an excuse to break up a singularly ill-assorted party.

The sight of a bat and ball, though the one was but a tennis-racket, and the other only made of india-rubber, could not but cheer Christopher. In a moment, under the able organisation of Captain Sandry, rules were drawn up, sides were chosen, and an exciting cricket-match was in progress. Improvised wickets were made of the gentlemen's evening-coats neatly folded in two heaps, and it was decided that the male players should be restricted to the use of their left hands.

In spite of Lady Clow's horrified prophecies, only one accident resulted from this impromptu game. Erica was unaccustomed to running, and wore, besides, monstrously high heels, wherefore she slipped presently upon the polished floor and fell, twisting her foot.

The hurt was very slight, but she turned it to good account by making it an excuse for retiring to a distant window-seat with Tom Garry, and entering upon a low-voiced conversation, which was covered by the noise of the cricketing party.

But Christopher's jealousy was assuaged by a few magic words which she had whispered in his ear after dinner—the first which she had voluntarily addressed to him since their quarrel in the woods; and the reply, not only to his abject and oft-repeated entreaties for

forgiveness, but to an impassioned letter which she had found that evening upon her dressing-table.

Lady Clow, who did not possess the clue to Christopher's extraordinary change of demeanour, was amazed by his sudden transition from the depths of gloom to the height of good spirits, when it was obvious and patent to her that Erica was flirting outrageously with another man.

Christopher laughed and shouted, uttered uncouth witticisms, and raced between the improvised wickets, sliding over the polished boards in his stockinged feet, in a delirium of happiness which shone from his eyes and transfigured his plain and sullen countenance.

He captained his side, and made top-score, with a pride and joy he would scarcely have felt, and certainly not have displayed, if he had been playing for his county, instead of for the amusement of two excited children. Brigit and Nora fell in love with him, and found him the most satisfactory and good-natured playfellow in the world. They decreed that the alarmed and dismayed Lady Clow should have an innings, and would gladly have prolonged the game indefinitely had Kathleen not insisted upon ordering the motor at a quarter to twelve.

Kathleen enjoyed a romp quite as much as her younger sisters, but she did not enjoy the attentions of Mr. Murch, which were pressed upon her with an insistence beyond anything she had hitherto experienced, and which she rightly attributed to the quantity of champagne he had imbibed.

"Thorverton is n't such a bad fellow after all," Robin said to his brother, when the party had broken up amid a warmth and noisiness of farewell very unlike the frigidity and embarrassment of its meeting, as the motor snorted its way cautiously through

the deer park. "In fact, he's rather a good fellow; but what in the name of thunder possesses him to invite that bounder Murch to stay in his house?"

"He did not invite him," interposed Brigit.

"Shut up, Kid, and go to sleep. It's bad enough to have to cart you out to dinner at all without being interrupted every time one——"

"But, Robin, I sat next to Mr. Murch, and he told me he invited himself. He said he was at Oxford with Mr. Thorverton and——"

"I know all about that," said Robin.

"I heard him say he invited himself, and I should think he was the kind of person who would not take 'No' for an answer," said Kathleen's musical voice from the corner of the car. "Mr. Thorverton was very dull at dinner, but he woke up afterwards, and enjoyed the cricket. It was a good idea, and broke the ice."

"It was our idea," said Brigit and Nora breathlessly.

"Dinner was a frightful frost," said Robin.

"But you had the luck to sit next to May, and she is a darling. I hated the other girl, the red-haired one," said Kathleen.

"Now, what a horrid, spiteful thing to say," said Tom indignantly.

Robin laughed.

"Good for you, Katie! But you give yourself away, my child. Pure jealousy!"

"It's not. May is far prettier than Miss Clow."

Tom exclaimed, and Robin nudged his sister, meaning that she was to desist.

"Anyway, May is the nicest girl I ever met in my life," Kathleen continued, "and I am going to tea with her next Monday, and I've promised that this time I really will take my banjo, as she is fond of

music, and said she was so disappointed I did n't sing to-night."

"I will drive you over," said Tom, with kind alacrity.

Though it was so unusually late, and though Lady Clow was almost dropping, as she said, with sleep, when she retired to rest, Erica chose to appear in her mother's bedroom half an hour after the departure of the young Garrys, and settle herself down for a talk.

She wore a blue cotton dressing-gown, ornamented with a quantity of cheap lace, and her magnificent hair fell in two heavy plaits over her shoulders, tied with odds and ends of tape, while a row of steel wavers ornamented her forehead. But the most unromantic accessories could not disguise her beauty, though the slovenliness to which she was addicted in private frequently marred its effect.

Lady Clow presented an even more frowsy and unstudied appearance than her daughter.

In a short, red flannel dressing-jacket, which oddly emphasised the spreading amplitude of her figure; with plentiful, wiry, bristling, iron-grey hair, rolled into an immense wad above her high and shining forehead; with surprised, light, round eyes fixed pleadingly upon her invading daughter, she sat propped up among the luxurious down pillows of her four-poster.

"Now, Erica, I do hope it 's nothing unpleasant, the last thing at night, or, rather, as one might say, the first thing in the morning, for it must be one o'clock, and I 'm nearly dead. I don't think I *can* keep awake, though I know, if anything could drive sleep away from me, it would be one of our talks," said the poor woman, with anxiety unspeakable. "And after all

the noise and racket of this evening, I shall have one of my worst headaches, I know I shall, unless I sleep it off in advance. How people can enjoy racing about in their stockings, and what the servants must think, screaming and throwing tennis-balls at one's head; all very well to say they're made of india-rubber, but it's the pace that kills, and one could lose an eye or a tooth in a moment. I do so dislike things of that sort and——"

"I am too much interested in life, just at the present moment, to feel like going to bed, so I thought I would come and talk matters over," said Erica, cutting her mother short as her custom was. "I expect, in the end, I shall sleep the better for it."

"You never think of me. I doubt if I shall sleep at all. Whatever it is, it is sure to be something to worry me," said poor Lady Clow.

"On the contrary, it should give you pleasant dreams. You're always wailing and weeping for fear I should go too far, as you are pleased to call it, with Christopher; so you should be glad to hear that, finding I could keep him quiet in no other way, I gave him to understand this evening that his suspense was ended. You see before you a practically engaged young woman."

"Erica, my darling!" cried Lady Clow.

She made as though she would leap out of bed to embrace her child, but the impossibility of such a feat, to one of her size and bulk, became apparent to her, even as she attempted to perform it; and, after the first wild effort, she collapsed: holding out two fond and shapeless arms, from which the wide, red flannel sleeves fell away, revealing their extraordinary size and whiteness.

Erica regarded those extended limbs attentively and

without movement or response of any kind; and they dropped, futile, upon the coverlet of the bed, under that calm gaze.

"How extraordinarily conventional you are, mamma! I believe the mere fact of my announcing to you the possibility of my speedy marriage makes you imagine that I should become demonstrative upon the spot. When have I ever been demonstrative?"

"Surely it is very natural on such an occasion that a mother should wish to kiss her daughter?" cried Lady Clow.

"Why talk in the third person?" asked Erica. "You know how it exasperates me. Yet, the moment you feel sentimental, I notice that you invariably begin to speak of yourself as though you were somebody else. Why make speeches at all when we are alone? Though I suppose I shall have to submit to being kissed and blessed in public, to any extent, if this really comes off."

"If *what* really comes off? Surely there's no doubt? You can't be going to throw him over if you're——"

"It was very annoying, having to precipitate matters like that," said Erica, pursuing her own train of thought as usual. "But, under the circumstances, it seemed the safest thing to do."

"Under what circumstances? You talk in riddles, and expect your mother to understand you."

"I never expected anything of the kind," said Erica, with a short laugh. "I am merely musing aloud over the irony of Fate. Here I get the opportunity of a lifetime—discover that an eldest son is as susceptible as the poorest curate that ever sang a psalm."

"Whatever else you are, I do beg you not to be profane, Erica," said her mother, bewildered. "I

wish I knew what you are talking about. You are making my poor head swim."

"I am talking about the Honourable Thomas, and telling you I discovered this evening that marrying him would be as easy as falling off a log."

"My dear, you met him for the first time to-night."

"I wish you would not interrupt, merely in order to state obvious facts, known to us both," said Erica irritably. "Of course, I met him for the first time to-night, and I also learnt from his own lips—for it was hardly necessary for me to cry, 'More, more, about yourself!' like the lady in *Punch,* to lure him on to confidences—that the Honourable Thomas is practically a pauper; that he is the poorest man in his regiment; that his father is hard-pressed to give him even the miserable allowance on which he manages to exist; and that he will have to let Kellacombe when he inherits it, unless he is sensible enough to marry a wife with money to keep it up. This being so, all my schemes for eventually becoming Lady Erriff ——"

"Erica!"

"Fall to the ground; and I find myself contemplating immediate marriage with the stupidest and richest man I ever met."

"How can you talk like this, if you seriously intend to marry Christopher?"

"My serious intentions do not make him less stupid."

"He is too good for you," said Lady Clow, with something like a sob. "You spoil everything, Erica, with your heartlessness, just when I am longing to fall on my knees and thank God. Why, why can't you fall in love with poor Christopher properly, as any one else in your place would? He is a very nice young man, and he will be able to give you everything you

want in the world, and he loves you to distraction. Any one can see he must, or he would never have put up with the way you have snubbed and bullied him from the moment we set foot in his house. If I have been hot and cold all over once, I have been hot and cold all over a thousand times."

"It may seem odd to you," said Erica, "and I have no doubt it does. But I can't fall in love to order. Now, if Christopher Thorverton and the Honourable Thomas——"

"I wish you would not call him the Honourable Thomas. It sounds so vulgar."

"If Christopher Thorverton and the Honourable Thomas and Anthony Denys could all be rolled into one," said Erica unmoved, "whereby the simplicity of the one, and the charm of the other, would doubtless mitigate or absorb the priggishness of the infinitely superior third,"—she set her short teeth rather savagely—"I have no doubt I could fall in love with the combination. But as it is, I am torn in three different directions, whenever I weigh their respective merits—a plain and stupid millionaire; a delightful eldest son, without a penny to bless himself with; an almost impossibly good-looking prig"—she took a fierce pleasure in repeating and emphasising the word —"but at the same time a man to be reckoned with, and not a boy to be managed, who, if he were roused, could do anything he chose——"

"I am quite sure Mr. Denys is not in love with you," said Lady Clow, "and I wish you would not talk in this dreadful manner. He is not at all the kind of man who would fall in love with you, nor for the matter of that, with anybody, I should say."

"That is what makes the thought of marrying him so interesting," said Erica. "His indifference and his

good looks almost outweigh the attractions of Christopher's money and Tom Garry's expectations put together. If only one could put them together. Alas! You see, I am much less mercenary and interested than you give me credit for."

Lady Clow suddenly sat up straight, and became seriously, almost fiercely, emphatic.

"Listen to me, Erica," she said. "It's all very well for you to go on in this mocking, heartless, flippant manner. I can't stop you. I've no control over you, and it's no use pretending I have. But I will say this. If you go throwing over such a chance as this, because your vanity misleads you into thinking you could ever persuade such a man as Anthony Denys to marry you, why all your cleverness and your beauty and the crookedness of your ways have served you nothing at all. I am only a simpleton, I know it very well, for you have told me so to my face; and God knows I'd rather be the simpleton I am, than the heartless daughter you are; but a mother knows,—a mother feels. . . ." Her voice shook, her firmness forsook her, and her weakness, and the affection for her child—which neither coldness nor mockery could cure, and which was the well-spring of that weakness—made her dissolve, as usual, into tears.

"There you go again, talking of a mother this, and a mother that," said Erica, not unkindly. "And as for heartlessness, it might occur to you, if you ever did reflect, mamma—which you never do—that you are to the full as mercenary as I am, since you cannot pretend you want me to marry Christopher for any other reason than because he is rich."

"It is natural I should want you to be happily settled," sobbed Lady Clow. "You never think what

a trial you and your ways are to me, Erica, nor how happy and peaceful I should be in the smallest lodging by myself, with nothing but a cup of tea and a boiled egg on a tray, and a library subscription, and no one to jeer at me and fill me with anxiety over their goings-on from morning till night. Though God knows I would n't force you into marrying any one against your will. I hope you are not accusing me of that?"

Erica laughed in spite of herself.

"It would certainly amuse me very much to see you try," she said. "Well, I suppose I may as well go, since I am not likely to get much sympathy from you in my disappointment."

"Your disappointment!" gasped Lady Clow.

"I dare say you will think me snobbish," said Erica dispassionately, "but I have always thought a nice little coronet would become me very well; and I will go so far as to say that, given my inward certainty that it lies within my powers to make the exchange, I should infinitely prefer marriage with an attractive young Guardsman of my own age, who would be able to give me the bauble I covet one day, to being stuck down here for life with a plain, sulky, loutish youth, of whom I shall be ashamed whenever I chance to recollect that he is my husband. However, the question of money—which is the question of common-sense—stands in my way."

"It stands in your way a great deal more than you think," said Lady Clow, weeping openly and profusely. "I have a very good mind to tell you——"

"What?"

A portion of her mother's large face was now hidden by her handkerchief, but her mighty, heaving shoulders betrayed her.

"I 've always tried to keep it from you," she said in muffled tones.

"For Heaven's sake, then, try to keep it from me no longer, whatever it is," said Erica impatiently. "What is it? Are you going to break it to me that I am not the Lady Clare, but a brat whom you took out of the workhouse; or that you have a mortal complaint, or what?"

"Erica! how can you say such dreadful things?" screamed Lady Clow.

"How can you make mysteries about nothing? I wish you would stop crying and tell me what the matter is. You have overdrawn your banking-account, I suppose, or lost all your money——"

"It 's—it 's—my poor child, we have never had any money to lose!" gasped Lady Clow, dropping her handkerchief, and looking at Erica with haggard, lack-lustre eyes. "I wanted to save your pride, Erica. Your poor father hoped you would never know——"

"What have we been living on, then, since he died?"

"On the allowance Mr. Thorverton made me after our misfortune, which Christopher continues to pay. That is why I wrote to him when his father died. I was afraid he would cut it off. We had no claim. And it was all we had to live on. We have nothing else in the world—nothing in all the world—but what he gives us."

Erica was silent. Her hands were clasped round her knees, her eyes fixed on the carpet.

"Now you know," said Lady Clow, plucking up courage in the conviction that she had at last impressed her child, "why it cuts me to the heart when you talk of our benefactor so contemptuously—our benefactor, that 's what he is. Though your poor

papa could never bear to think of it. Naturally it hurt his pride."

"But he took the money," said Erica, in a hard voice.

"Don't blame him," said Lady Clow, holding out shaking hands of entreaty. "Don't! He kept back nothing from his creditors. He gave up everything. Every one said there was n't a stain upon his character. He lived and died an upright man. But he was old and broken; very broken in health. And he was so proud of you, Erica. It hurt him worse to think of you than to take my cousin's money."

"Does Christopher think I know this?"

"I told him myself that you did not know, and begged him never to tell you, and he promised he never would."

Erica was silent again, and her mother sank back upon the pillows and closed her eyes.

"There 's something fine about the little beast after all," said the girl slowly.

"How can you call him that after what I 've told you?"

"It makes it all rather awkward unless— Look here," said Erica, "the best thing would be for me to go on knowing nothing about it."

"How can you know nothing about it when I 've just told you?" said her mother, looking at her helplessly.

"I mean, of course, that you are not to let him know you 've told me," said Erica impatiently.

"Erica, I will have nothing to do with crooked ways. I don't trust you. I won't have any cruel tricks played on that good young man."

"Good young fiddlesticks. He is a very worthless, ill-tempered, self-indulgent young man," said Erica

sharply, "and his only merit is that he is willing to give away what costs him nothing, or to let himself be robbed of it for that matter, by any adventurer who cares to flatter and pillage him, rather than take an ounce of trouble to prevent it. But his being robbed is no concern of yours, though I shall take precious good care to make it a concern of mine. What concerns you, mamma, is that I shall not leave this room until I have your promise not to let Christopher know you have told me about this allowance he is paying you."

"Erica, I will not be bullied like this. I am half dead with want of sleep."

"Surely you may be satisfied. I told you I had promised to marry him before you told me anything."

"So you did," said Lady Clow weakly.

"Then promise."

"Very well, I promise."

Erica rose slowly and came to the bedside, and bent over and touched her mother's cheek with her lips; and Lady Clow, with a stifled, pitiful cry of love and longing, put her arms about her beautiful daughter, and kissed the thick, rippling hair, which was all she could reach, again and again.

"Good-night!" said Erica, disengaging herself, and moving slowly towards the door. "If you break your promise I shall throw over Christopher at once. I advise you to stay in bed to breakfast to-morrow, and then I shall probably be able to cheer you with the definite announcement of my engagement by the time you straggle downstairs. Then you will be able to kiss me and cry over me as much as ever you like before the assembled household. They will expect it."

CHAPTER XV

AT eight o'clock next morning Christopher was already out of doors. His body was tingling with the glow from his cold tub; his short, fair hair was brushed so close to his head that it was scarcely visible; his eyes shone with excitement and hope and happiness.

He wore white cricketing flannels and white tennis shoes, and passed with swift, noiseless tread across the gravel drive and over the dew-spangled grass, to the big kitchen-garden where he had been bidden to await the coming of Erica.

Anticipation of the interview, and his anxiety lest the weather should not be propitious, had kept him awake since dawn, though Christopher was accustomed to sleep, without waking, from the moment his head touched the pillow until the moment when the ubiquitous Cloberry called him.

The early mist had promised well, and now a brilliant sunshine fulfilled the promise. A deliciously fresh breeze brought to his ears, as he approached the kitchen-garden,—which was at some distance from the house—all the cheerful sounds of the home farm, the quacking of ducks and gobbling of turkeys, the whistling of a labourer over his work, and the calls and laughter of children.

"My God, it is good to be alive!" said Christopher; and the ejaculation was as nearly a hymn of praise as he knew how to offer. His heart swelled as he looked

upon the fair prospect of his domain, upon the herds of deer and cattle in the misty park, and the grey turrets of the Abbey, half buried in ancient timber; upon the swelling uplands of distant meadow and red earth, and rounded masses of woodland stretching into blue distance.

He exulted secretly in his thoughts, not because these things were his, but because they were his to offer to Erica: the gifts that were to be weighed with his insignificant personality, and make him better worth her acceptance.

He pushed open the ornamental ironwork gate in the great red-brick wall, which surrounded the old kitchen-garden, and walked with blithe tread down the path between the edgings of box.

A robin was sunning itself on an apple-tree, white butterflies were hovering over the purple blossoms of the potato patches, and the scarlet-runners flowered brilliantly.

Great bushes of lavender were set at the corners of the *espaliers* of apples and pears. Stiff orange and lemon-tinted beds, which were guarded on all sides by marigolds, beloved of gardeners, crowded about their sturdy brown stems.

Christopher paused beside a bed of carnations, red and rose and white, and stooped and picked the finest he could find, laying them anxiously and carefully one against the other, to make a little posy for Erica.

He had to walk many times up and down the garden path, and to look long and often through the iron scrollwork curves of the gate, down the vista of the shrubbery opening which led to it, before Erica came.

At one moment he turned almost sick with anxiety lest she should have changed her mind; at another he grew tender with the thought that she had overslept

herself; and again became hopeful with the certainty that he was too early.

He turned white when he saw her, and stopped short for a moment, and then hurried forward to meet her, with violently-beating heart.

She wore her favourite blue gown, with uncovered white throat exposed to the freshness of the morning breeze, and sleeves scarcely reaching below the elbow, so that her white and dimpled arms were also bare.

A lilac sunbonnet—of the kind cottagers used to wear, and which, to their surprise and disdain, are now affected by those whom they have been taught to believe their betters—lent her a rustic air, which was singularly appropriate to her fresh colouring and buxom, comely figure.

Christopher held out a shaking hand with the carnations, and she took them with a smile and fastened them in the frill at her throat.

"You—you meant what you said last night, then?" he said, in a husky whisper. "I have hardly dared to believe you meant it, Erica. I thought I must be dreaming, and that presently I should wake——"

"Should I be here if I had not meant it?"

Her tone was light and mocking, but her lips smiled at him, and of her own accord she held out a kind hand to him. The boy took it between his own, which trembled still, and bowed his head over it, and kissed it with reverence unspeakable.

His plain face was transfigured with a joy which yet held something of lingering doubt.

"It is so hard to believe, because—what made you change so suddenly?" he asked diffidently, yet telling himself that now, surely, he had a right to ask.

She laughed.

"I suppose I contrasted you with Tom Garry, to his disadvantage," she said.

"You can't mean that," Christopher said simply; and as her lips parted again in a smile, he cried in a sudden passion of love and tenderness, "I 'm too happy to mind you laughing at me. What does it matter why you changed, so long as you have changed? Erica, do you realise what this means? That—that you 're going to be my wife."

"Do you realise I am four years older than you are, foolish boy?"

"What 's that got to do with it?" he said indignantly.

"And that everybody will say you had better have married Kathleen Garry?"

"What bosh! I am marrying the woman I love," he said, with boyish magniloquence. "That 's enough for me. And one comfort is I 'm of age and my own master, and nobody can interfere. We can get married to-morrow if we like."

"I promise you we will do nothing of the kind," said Erica.

Two of the under-gardeners appeared; with stolid faces that concealed a burning curiosity, they averted their eyes, touched their caps, and passed to their work.

"Let us find a more sheltered place," said Christopher discontentedly. "Every one can see us here."

"We shall be late for breakfast, and I am longing to hear how every one takes the news."

"Breakfast may wait all day, so far as I am concerned," said Christopher.

They came in late, but the rest of the party were still in the dining-room.

May, in her black morning frock, with the neat white folds at throat and wrist, was at the head of the table, behind the massive silver tea and coffee services; Lady Clow was beguiling her anxiety with a hot muffin; Captain Sandry was dexterously carving ham and uttering bright, conversational remarks at a side-table; and Joe Murch, bending tenderly over his bull-terrier pup in a corner, was coaxing it to eat bread and milk.

Christopher marched into the room with head erect, forgetting to give precedence to Erica—as he always forgot such small observances of courtesy—and leaving her to follow as she chose. He walked straight up to May.

He had his own ideas of etiquette, and considered it was due to his sister that she should be at once, and publicly, informed of his engagement.

"Look here, I say, May," he blurted out. "You've got to know before anybody else. Erica and I are going to be married."

Such announcements are generally received with surprise, even though they may not be altogether unexpected; this one came upon May with a kind of shock, not of astonishment, but of uneasiness. She turned a little pale; then, recollecting herself, kissed her brother; and, murmuring words of congratulation and welcome, held up her face to Erica.

Christopher had expected May's kisses and congratulations, and had braced himself to receive them, but he had not expected Lady Clow to fall upon his neck, which she did with a suddenness and abandon that literally staggered him.

"Oh, Christopher, I hope you will be happy," she cried, bursting into tears. "My dear, dear Christopher, I hope you will be very, very happy."

"That's all right," responded Christopher, transferring her weight to a chair, with as little delay as circumstances rendered possible. "I say, by Jove, I suppose I ought to have asked your consent and blessing, and all that sort of thing, or is n't it necessary when a girl's of age? I say, Erica!" He laughed loudly to cover his embarrassment. "I say! It just shows! I never did know how to do the right thing."

"Erica knew I should be only too pleased, too glad —every one must know. Oh, dear; oh, dear! I really ought not to be so foolish," said Lady Clow, looking round with a feeble smile, and large tears dropping on to the ham which Captain Sandry now brought her.

"Best congratulations, Christie, old man. We're all delighted!" he cried, with extraordinary heartiness. "And I'm very sure that no one is better pleased than Miss May will be to welcome her new sister— won't you, Miss May?"

It was one of those appeals which he constantly made to May, and to which she as constantly failed to respond. But upon this occasion Erica came to her rescue.

"Do be contented to make your own speeches, and leave us to invent congratulations for ourselves," she said in her distinct drawl, "and bring me some eggs and bacon, please, for I am starving!"

Cloberry—who was hovering in the background like an imitation archbishop waiting to bestow a respectful benediction upon the newly-betrothed couple—carried Miss Clow's coffee round the table, and set it beside her plate in a suppressed delight, and triumph unspeakable.

"He might ha' bin a waiter," he reported immediately afterwards to the excited household—to whom the news of the betrothal was already related,

for the head gardener had come in for orders an hour earlier than usual, to report strange proceedings in the kitchen-garden, witnessed by himself and his second-in-command from the safe shelter of a distant greenhouse.

"It 's all settled. See if it is n't," he said, and the prophecy flew from mouth to mouth, so that Cloberry had merely to confirm the news to an expectant audience.

"The Captain's nose is out of joint now," he said, chuckling, "unless she keeps him on just for the pleasure of orderin' of him about. He might ha' bin a waiter. I 'd like to hear anybody speak to me that way. But well she knows I would n't stand it. 'Don't you go shoving of your oar in,' she says, as near as a lady could; 'and fetch me the eggs and bacon,' she says, as haughty as a princess, and he took and done it without so much as a word. I was never nearer laughing before company in all my life."

Now that the engagement was an accomplished fact, Mrs. Foss and Margery not only accepted the inevitable with a good grace, but even found cause for congratulation in it.

"'T is wonderful how when a thing happens, arl one's thoughts about it seem different-like," said Margery to May. "It seemed the greatest of misfartunes when virst us began to think about it; but now 't is settled, my child, one zees 't is arl for the best, and might ha' been worse."

Margery had come up from Christopher's study, whither she had followed the young master, and had kissed him, scolded him, and wept over him in a breath, to his confusion and surprise, though it was

true that he greatly preferred the embraces of his old nurse to those of his prospective mother-in-law.

"It might have been worse, my darling, for at least she've got a spirit of her own, and will look after Master Chris, as every wife who respects herself has to look after a man, and the more especial when he's but a bye. I'll warrant if she can stand up to that there Sandry and best him now, he'll have ne'er a ghost of a chance when once she be firmly wed to Master Christopher; and next time as he's coaxed up to London on business—which I'll warrant Mr. Gethell knowed nart of his business—'t will be his wife and not Captain Sandry as will have the coaxing of him and the looking after him, and the bringing of him back to his house, which it's my belief he'd never want to leave at arl if they'd let my poor bye alone." She hardly paused for breath. "No more sitting up to one in the morning, as no Christian woman cude put up with for a moment, and losing money at poker, which he's no more a match in for Joe Murch, drunk or sober, than the babe unborn; and the whiskey back in the cellar where it oughter be," she said, growing more jubilant every moment over Christopher's prospects. "And the nurseries opened again, I hope, before another year's over our heads, and me in them, to look after another little bye with curly hair. Not that I'd ever leave you, Miss May, while you wanted me; but, still, a little bye! And arl these years I've felt it so as we took and left him when he were only seven year old," she said, and looked at May with eyes of forget-me-not blue shining wetly in her wholesome, rosy face.

"Poor Margery!" said her young mistress soothingly.

"'T is the only thing as cude ever timpt me from

your side; like as if God gave me the chance fur tu make it up to Master Christopher, vor arl he lost when we took and left him," she faltered. "For God knows as John Youatt cude n't persuade me, tho' he 's tried tu his hardest, and faithful he 's bin though his sour pippin of a sister Ann done her best tu turn him from me. But 't was n't him nor no man as cude timpt me vor to leave your poor mamma nor you, my child, nor nothing else in this world—except it was a little bye."

"Oh, Margery; but then I should understand; though I don't know how I should ever part with you," cried May; but her eyes, too, were wet at the thought of that imaginary little boy with curly hair, who was to make up to Margery for all she had suffered in leaving little Master Chris.

May spent the morning alone in her sitting-room, ostensibly copying some music for Anthony, and in reality thinking over what had happened. She looked out upon the sunny park towards the blue smoke rising among the trees, amid which the Manor House lay hid, and wondered why she was not more glad, and why she could not rid herself of the feeling of uneasiness which oppressed her whenever she thought of her brother and Erica.

Christopher's happiness had shone from his eyes, and softened his voice and made his manner almost gracious, and Erica's manner towards him had also softened, as was natural; but May was not for a moment deceived into thinking, therefore, that Erica loved Christopher. She felt, in consequence, more tender towards her brother than she had ever felt before. Something of the anxiety of one who sees advancing danger, and cannot warn the loved one of his peril, beset her. What could she do?

All she could do, she did. "Oh, God," she prayed, kneeling up among the cushions of the window-seat and leaning her head against the clasped hands that rested on the pane, "let her be good to him. I don't think I have helped him at all. I wanted to, but perhaps she will do it better than I, for she is not afraid of those men, and I am. Let her influence be for good, and save poor Chris."

She was not very clear in what Christopher was to be saved from; but confused forebodings and anxieties were never far distant from her mind when she thought of her brother. Vaguely she knew that he troubled himself not at all to look after his affairs, and left the estate-work blindly in the hands of the agent whom every one distrusted and disliked. Vaguely she knew that the influence of Joe Murch was an evil one, for all his seeming good-nature. Vaguely she knew that Christopher's voice grew louder, and his speech thicker, and his eyes more staring, as the evening advanced; until sometimes, at the time she bade him "Good-night," he hardly seemed to know what he was doing.

She had stood forth bravely and made her voice heard on one occasion, but she had only succeeded in angering Christopher, and had never dared to interfere again.

"Why do you keep trying to persuade him to have more whiskey?" she said, with beating heart and flashing eyes, to Mr. Murch. "He has had a great deal already. You must know it cannot be good for him to have so much."

"Wa's the matter?" Chris called suspiciously across the billiard-table. "Why are you bull'ing poor ole Joe?"

"Your sister is going to take charge of you, it

appears," said Captain Sandry, with his smooth laugh. "She is quite right, Christie. She thinks you 're too fond of whiskey-and-sodas, and that we ought not to let you drink so many as we do, don't you, Miss May?"

"Who the devil 's going to dictate to me in my own house?" said Christopher, glaring at him. "Put down that glass, Murch. I can help myself. I hate being helped."

He put down his cue, walked across the room with almost unnatural steadiness and glassy eyes fixed resentfully upon May.

It was as though he desired to prove to her that repeated whiskies-and-sodas had no effect upon his seasoned head, for he helped himself carefully to a large tumbler, full to the brim, and drank it off. Then he returned to his place with the same cautious directness, took up his cue, eyed it, chalked it defiantly, and made five successive cannons.

Her heart, which had been full of love and pity and the generous longing to defend him, had swelled with mortification and wounded pride at the boyish unkindness of his defiance, and the manner in which he ignored her during the rest of the evening. Also, she had observed Joe Murch's ostentatious wink at Captain Sandry, and that gentleman's as ostentatious twisting of his black moustache to conceal a smile.

It was Captain Sandry and Joe Murch who were mortified now, and Erica who smiled, though she by no means troubled herself to conceal it. She did not care what she said, and kept both the sycophants in a constant state of alarm and anger, arousing Christopher's suspicions of them at every turn.

She lured her host away from billiards and took him for moonlight walks in shrubberies, sending him up to bed intoxicated with love instead of whiskey;

she exacted from him a promise that he would play poker no more, and as it was the only card game he knew, and since it was certain he would never take the trouble to learn another, Joe Murch realised, with stupefaction, that one of his principal sources of revenue was closed to him for ever.

She opened and fingered the estate-books, which were laid occasionally, as a matter of form, upon Christopher's writing-table; inquired in Captain Sandry's presence whether a chartered accountant ever went through them; and begged Christopher to give the job to a friend of her own, who would be thankful for it, and who was to be absolutely trusted.

May had stood aghast, as Erica attacked first one and then the other of her enemies and laid them low; while her deep, drawling voice never wavered any more than her cold and wary eyes wavered in their mocking regard.

Christopher winced often, and sometimes broke forth into sulky protestations; but a look from Erica had generally sufficed to quell or charm him; and he was not above a certain boyish pleasure in seeing his seniors thus routed by the girl he loved.

Young as he was, he was not altogether unaware of the fact that his friends took advantage of his good-nature in many ways; and this sub-consciousness of his probably accounted for the uncertainty of his attitude towards them, and the irritability of his temper. He felt a secret pride in the thought that the pair of them were no match for Erica, though he scarcely realised that in her influence over him lay the secret of their submission.

"She will manage Chris as I could never manage him," May thought, as she leaned her head against the window-pane, and looked out at the heavy purple

clouds that were now rolling up over the low hills, threatening a storm, and the break-up of the long heat, "and yet—I can't feel glad about it—I can't —I can't! He seems such a boy to marry, and it seems as though no one cared for him, and every one wanted his money. Poor Chris!"

CHAPTER XVI

"OF course you won't attempt to live with them; that would be a great mistake, my dear," said Lady Denys. "You will come over here, and take care of me, and be taken care of. Your mother's room is waiting for you, all ready, and any other room which you may choose to make into a little retreat for yourself when you are tired of my company."

"Oh, Cousin Rosabelle, but Christopher says I am to live with them."

"That's all nonsense, my love," said the old lady decidedly. "A newly-married couple ought to be left alone, unless you think it will be too dull for you here, shut up with an old woman like me, and with Anthony, who is so grave and silent, and so much older than you are."

"But I think I am more at home with old people," said May simply. "Perhaps because I have never been with boys and girls of my own age. You see, I was always with mamma, and never found her too old to be my companion. When we were with the Garrys, they seemed to me rather childish. I dare say they thought me odd and old-fashioned," she said anxiously. "But I can't help knowing I am much happier when I am rationally occupied than when I am romping."

"My dear, you are a regular little old woman. But, all the same, Lady Erriff wrote me a note, and

told me she was delighted with you—so you were evidently just what she wanted you to be. And she said you made bosom friends with Kathleen, and that both the young men had fallen in love with you, and was evidently delighted that it should be so."

"I am afraid she exaggerates a little," said May, astonished. "I liked Kathleen and I liked the boys, and I liked the two little girls, though they are rather rough and very noisy."

"I am afraid it is you that are as quiet as a mouse, and not used to the gaiety natural to your age," said the old lady, shaking her head. "However, it is probably very lucky for me that you should be like that. It 's an ill wind that blows nobody good. And if Christopher marries his Maypole, and you come over here and live with Anthony and me, I shall be the gainer. We will order all the new books from the library, and discuss them together; and you shall pour out tea for me, and make Anthony's coffee at breakfast, and be the daughter of my old age, whom I have always wished for. Not a very bright prospect for you, my darling; but think what it means to me, who sit alone all day, listening to the ticking of the clock, and looking at the faces on the wall of people who are dead and gone. And instead, I should have your dear, little, living face smiling at me, all warm and flushed as it is now; and hear your little feet on the stairs, and listen to your little news and chatter of every day, to give me an interest in the present, that am so tired of thinking, hour after hour and day after day, of the past."

May could not tell her old relation how bright the prospect seemed to her; but her colour came and went, as Lady Denys thus described the life that was to be hers, if she chose, when her brother was married.

Her own imagination was busy, even while she listened to her cousin's words.

She saw herself at breakfast with Anthony, often alone, since Lady Denys did not rise early; she saw herself running in and out of the workshop, at home there, and becoming daily more necessary to him in a hundred ways, working with him at his countless little jobs, helping him to choose subjects for his sketches, as she had once helped her mother; riding with him, not to part as the clock struck, for twenty-four hours, but to dismount at his own door; and to walk with him through the little garden to the Manor House, and to dress for dinner under the same roof, and to sit next him at that meal, and spend a happy evening afterwards together, when perhaps he would play his fiddle, or sing, to her accompaniment.

It was true that May was fonder of what she had called rational occupation than of games. It did not bore her, as it would have bored many girls of her age, to copy music, to mount sketches, to mend torn portfolios, and bind worn book-covers together. She preferred, indeed, the humblest occupation to idleness, and was by nature a very industrious and capable little creature.

Cousin Rosabelle perceived that the girl had lost herself in dreams, and wondered what they were; but she was too old and too wise to ask.

"That minx of an Erica is certainly more or less in love with Anthony, so it is very clear he has not lost his attraction. I suppose she gave him up as a bad job after her attack upon him the other day, poor thing!" she reflected. "I wonder whether this little creature has also lost her heart. Tom Garry would be far more suitable, but, on the other hand, young as she is, I believe she would make Anthony

happy, and be happy with him herself. Good Heavens, into what a dull groove would they settle down! She is so docile that she would follow his lead in everything, and become the slave of a thousand little fads and ways. I suppose Christopher would give her a *dot*. Not that it would signify much whether he did or not, since they would have next to no use for it. However, there would be children, I hope, and money is always needed then. It would be just like Anthony to refuse to take anything with her, beyond poor Elizabeth's little fortune which is hers already. He never does the natural, prosaic thing, if he can help it. Both of them could do infinitely better from a worldly point of view. But that is what it will probably end in, if she comes and settles here, and goes pottering about with him all day in the workshop, and riding with him in the evening—marriage. Well . . . she will be tender enough to me when my dark hour comes, and it cannot be far off; and she will close my eyes with a very gentle hand, God bless her. I suppose I ought to be thankful. And they will live and die here, humble and busy and happy and innocent, and perfectly contented," thought Lady Denys, tapping an impatient foot upon the beaded cushion at her feet.

"I suppose Erica's mother—I must call the girl by her Christian name now—is in the seventh heaven?" she asked.

"She is very happy," said May. "She cried a good deal." Even May could not help smiling over the recollection of Lady Clow's display of emotion, though she reproached herself for unkindness. "She seems very anxious there should be no delay."

"I am far from blaming her," said the old lady grimly. "Will she take up her abode at the Abbey, too, pray?"

"Oh, no, no! She talks all the time of her Kensington lodging, and I can't help fancying that she quite looks forward to returning and settling down quietly all by herself."

"Aye. That girl would be a handful."

"And I don't think poor Cousin Jennifer likes the country. She says the only reason she ever cares to go out of doors is for the pleasure of popping into a shop; and that, of course, she cannot have here. She can't walk far, and driving makes her so nervous that she screams and clutches the person next her all the time. And she likes some friend or other to drop in to tea every day, and is very much attached to her clergyman. Altogether I am sure she is much happier at home. It seems strange, but I believe, in her heart, she does not like the Abbey. She is always complaining how slippery the floors are, and saying she believes the galleries must be haunted."

"My dear, it is all a question of habit. People are like trees, and must be transplanted young or not at all. Unless, also like trees, they have been transplanted so often that they have grown accustomed to it. When do you suppose the wedding will come off?"

"They do not seem very well agreed yet on that point. Christopher wishes it to be immediately, and Erica says some time before Christmas."

"Well, that is quite the correct attitude for her," said Lady Denys drily. "But I hope, after the proper amount of entreaty, that she will allow herself to be persuaded to be married as soon as she can buy wedding clothes. Engaged people are merely a nuisance to themselves, and to everybody else."

"Of course, it is very annoying that this girl should have snapped up poor young Thorverton before the

breath was well out of his father's body," said Lady Erriff, on the same afternoon. "When we punctured our tire to-day, and they drove up in their motor, of course we had to speak to them; and there was the poor boy, looking very foolish as well he might, and explaining this was his young woman! I was very much annoyed, until I found out it had only been settled that morning. And then, of course, I understood why I had heard nothing about it before."

"I see," said Lord Erriff.

"However, of course it makes no difference to the kindness I feel for him and his sister, though I thought Miss Clow a very second-rate person, and took a dislike to her on the spot."

"I quite understand that, my dear."

"I had a nice little talk with poor young Thorverton while Tom kept her engaged in conversation; and I must say she made eyes at him in a very odd way for a person engaged that morning. Poor young Thorverton! I felt sorry for him. I tried not to speak of it, and kept him on the subject of his sister. He let out that he intended to come down very handsomely when she marries. He is evidently anxious she should marry. I suppose this odious Miss Clow is jealous of her and wants her out of the way."

"Is she odious? That is what Kathleen says," said Lord Erriff, and his brown eyes twinkled. "She seems to have turned the heads of all the young men, however. I saw Dr. Dobree this morning, who had been called in to attend Lady Clow, and he could talk of nothing but the good looks of this young woman. She had evidently bowled him over at the first glance."

"I hope you did n't encourage him, darling. He is a married man, and should be thinking of his patients' diseases, and not of their looks. And I cannot see that

she is at all out of the way. There is something unwomanly to me in a deep voice. And I never can admire red hair, though I know it is the fashion for people to pretend to like it nowadays. She wears far too much of it; and when all is said and done, it means a hot temper. No, darling, I am sorry for poor young Thorverton, being caught like this when he is only just of age by a woman who is thirty if she 's a day. Nothing will induce me to believe she is only six-and-twenty; the boys may say what they like. Well over thirty is what I said to myself the moment I set eyes upon her."

Lord Erriff was tempted to say "Hum," but refrained; and said instead, "I wish I had seen the young woman,"—in a tone of heartfelt regret.

Christopher entered May's sitting-room with an air half shy, and half confident; and something of boyish eagerness in his aspect touched May, and reminded her of the little brother of her earliest recollections.

It was as though happiness had brought back to him the vanished innocence of childhood, and smoothed from his young face the lines prematurely engraved thereon by self-indulgence, and the seeking after pleasures that leave no joy behind, but only discontent, and shame, and weariness of mind and soul.

He shut the door and came to his sister's side, and, bending over her, kissed her rather hurriedly and shamefacedly—the first caress he had ever volunteered to bestow upon her. Then he wheeled up an easy chair and sat down beside her and lighted the inevitable pipe.

"I say, May, I want to talk to you awfully, if you don't mind," he said. "I hope I 'm not disturbing you?"

She was so glad that, in his gladness, he should thus turn to her, that her blue eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, Chris, it is very nice to see you up here, in my dear little room. Just our two selves," she said, hardly above a whisper.

"Erica has gone to her room to lie down. She had a headache. We had a long run in the car, and I expect, besides, all the fuss—her mother makes a most infernal to-do about the whole thing—has been too much for her," he said gravely. "So I thought I'd come and ask you to give me a cup of tea here. Will you? Shall I ring?"

"No, no," said May eagerly. "I have my little tea-set that mamma used to make tea with for herself, and a spirit lamp and silver kettle. I make my own tea when I am up here. Margery always puts everything ready for me in the little lobby."

She brought in a tray full of dainty preparations, and once more shut herself into the sanctum of her sitting-room, with her brother as an interested witness of her proceedings.

He was vaguely conscious of rest and relief in her presence, and leaned back in his chair, stretching himself in ungainly fashion, and lazily watching May's light figure, as she hovered about the little tea-table, and set her silver kettle to boil.

"I say, you remind me of old Anthony. You're always doing some little job or another: as busy as a bee," he said.

"I like to be occupied," said May sedately, "and you shall have much better tea than you get downstairs."

"I generally don't have tea at all downstairs," said honest Christopher. "I've got into the habit of having whiskey-and-soda at this hour. You see, the other

fellows prefer it. But I suppose I shall have to change when I 'm married."

"Oh, Chris, you look so young to be married!" She could not help laughing, as she looked at the clean-shaven, boyish face.

"I wish to Heaven the beastly wedding was over," said Chris, with fervent emphasis. "That 's what I funk. Going up to London and having a lot of people to look on, and beastly wedding-presents to thank people for——"

"Have they so many friends?"

"I suppose so. Lady Clow was calculating the number of invitations she 'd have to send. I shan't ask any one except poor old Joe to be my best man. But I did n't mean to talk about that, May. I wanted to consult you about other things: first of all, about doing up a suite of rooms here for Erica. I think she 'd like that, and we ought to make some sort of preparation for a bride, you know. It 's always been the way in this house. I know my father did when he married."

"Would n't she rather do it for herself afterwards?"

"She can alter what she does n't like," said Christopher magnificently. "But you 've got jolly good taste, May. I like your frocks, for instance," he said gravely, "although they 're black, of course, better than any one's I ever saw. Now, Erica, sometimes—of course she 's quite a different style—but——"

"I think she has not had very much money to spend on her clothes," said May, who disliked Erica's flamboyant taste in dress very much, but was at once too honest and too generous not to offer this fair and reasonable excuse for her sometimes ultra-remarkable appearance.

"I expect that 's it," he said gratefully. "Well,

she 'll be able to get all she wants now, and go to all the right places, which is half the battle."

He paused exultantly, and a triumphant smile almost transfigured his plain face.

"I 've never really felt grateful enough for—for having plenty of money till now," he said. "But now, by Jove, I realise what it would mean to me if I was n't able to give Erica all she wanted; and it makes a fellow grateful to—to——"

"To God," said May simply.

"All that sort of thing," said Christopher hastily and shamefacedly, but with no lack of sincerity. "I tell you what it is, May, old Gethell will be jolly glad of this. He 'll find it 'll make me attend to business. For instance, I 've written to tell him to draw up a proper will for me at once. He 's been at me like a gadfly about it for weeks and weeks, and I could n't make up my mind what I wanted to do, and I could n't see there was any hurry. But now, well, a kind of sense of the responsibility he was always jawing about seems to have come over me at last. There 's Erica to think of. One never knows what may happen. Suppose I died before we could get married—she might be left without. I can't bear to think of it."

May touched the hand that grasped the arm of the chair with a tenderness, almost motherly.

"Of course, I should have to make another will when we 're married, I know all about that," he went on, "but it 's not right to take any chances in this life. I 've come to see old Gethell was quite right. And, look here, old girl, you need n't think my love for my—my wife—is going to make me forget I 've got a sister. No, by Jove. This is your home as much as ever. I 've told Erica so, and she quite

agreed; and I 've told old Gethell he 's to put a sum of money aside to make a proper settlement on you when the time comes. He suggested some rot or other about that when he was here, but I was n't in the mood to pay any attention just then, as it happened. But now I 've said that, whatever happens, you 're to have twenty thousand down as your marriage portion apart from anything you 've got already, which I 've nothing to do with. And I 've told him the same must be settled on Erica. You see I want to do the right thing by each of you. Cousin Rosabelle may go on hinting I 'm not fit to take care of you as much as she likes. I 'll show everybody I don't forget my sister just because I happen to be in love."

"Oh, Chris—dear, dear Chris! Indeed I don't want any more money."

"That 's all bosh! Business is business. You 've got to have it, and people have got to know you 're an heiress. I told Lady Erriff this afternoon."

Christopher was honestly unaware of the difficulty with which Lady Erriff had extracted this information, which he believed he had imparted to her of his own accord.

"Did you see Lady Erriff this afternoon?"

"Rather! Their rotten old tin-kettle of a car had broken down, as usual, and we stopped to help them; and while the two shovers were wrangling over what was wrong, besides the puncture, old Lady Erriff nipped out and started jawing to me, and I had to leave Erica and listen to her for ages, while she rotted on and on. Tom Garry looked after Erica, and she said afterwards that he bored her to death and made her head spin; but I was sorry for the poor chap, because I saw in a moment that he was frightfully mashed on Erica, and I knew what it must mean to him to see

her so happy with another fellow. It was a lark telling old mother Erriff about it, though. She said she hoped we had n't been in too great a hurry, but she was kind in the end, and asked no end of questions about Erica."

The little silver kettle was hissing and bubbling merrily by this time, and May poured the boiling water into the Dresden tea-pot; and presently brought a cup of tea and some cake, on a little china plate, to Christopher's side. She had sweetened the tea to his taste, and remembered that he was especially fond of seedcake, for such details appealed to her housewifely spirit.

"I tell you one thing, May," he said, struck with these attentions, "the man who marries you will be a lucky beggar, and you 'll make him jolly comfortable." He knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and put it into his pocket, and fell to work upon the little repast with zest, talking eagerly all the while, and with a loquacity quite unusual to him, of the rooms which he proposed to have redecorated and refurnished in the Louis Seize style, which Erica had said she preferred.

May persuaded him with some difficulty to leave the old, dim, oak-panelled rooms he had decided to renovate, in peace with their dusty ancient faded belongings; and to concentrate his energies upon the disused drawing-rooms in the modern wing of the Abbey, and the large bedrooms above them, now filled with solid early Victorian furniture.

"But those have been done up and furnished comparatively recently," he urged.

"They are so ugly, Chris, and the others are beautiful. Cousin Rosabelle would say you were a Goth to disturb them. But no one would mind what you did with the new wing."

"I shall do what I like with any of it. It's my house."

"I didn't mean to vex you. You asked me—" faltered May.

"That's all right. And I know you've got taste and I haven't. It shall be as you say," said Christopher hastily. "After all, as I said, Erica can alter anything she doesn't like. And, look here, she wants to have a trip up to town soon, to get some clothes, she says, and see about her trousseau. Would you mind coming up with me when she does go? We'd go to the Ritz, where we stopped before, and you could help me to choose some diamonds and things for her."

"I will do anything you like. But—had not mamma some beautiful things?" faltered May. "Margery said there were a number of jewels put away, which belonged to her. Ought not Erica to have those when she is your wife?"

Christopher paused in the flow of his conversation, and fingered his tea-cup nervously.

Then he burst forth:

"I'd rather buy Erica all she wants myself, and give you those. It's not as if they were heirlooms, or anything of that kind. My father bought them. I'll tell Gethell to see they're all handed over to you; and—and—if you don't mind, May, I'd rather you said nothing about them to Erica. It's quite the right thing for you to have them, you see. Meantime, I wish you'd tell me what you think she'd like. Of course she can choose what she fancies, but I want to give her a surprise or two as well. I thought of one of those things people wear on their heads at the opera."

But May knew nothing about such ornaments, and her ideas did not soar high enough to satisfy the young

gentleman. They presently agreed that it was impossible to decide what form the proposed gift should take until the jewellers' stores actually lay before them. The redecoration of the drawing-rooms proved to be a more fertile subject, and Christopher listened eagerly to May's dissertations upon French art, and urged her to unheard-of extravagance.

"I want her to realise I don't think anything good enough for her," he said.

"Oh, Chris, I hope you will be very happy! I did not dream you loved her so much," said May, rather wistfully. "I hope—I hope, she cares for you—a little—too—" she faltered, unable to hide altogether the fear and anxiety which possessed her.

"That's all right," said Chris, with an unsteady laugh. "Of course it's not the same. I could n't expect it. Though she thinks it is, bless her. But she cares all right. She told me so last night," said Christopher simply. "That's what bucked me up so, all of a sudden. You see, she did n't care a bit at first, and then she found she did, and did n't like it. That's why she was so capricious and down on me, and all that—as she had a perfect right to be, since she knew I loved her. And then all of a sudden she gave in. She was quite frank about it all, you know her way. The truth in season and out of season, as she says. . . ."

He drew his beloved pipe again from his pocket, examined it carefully, and rubbed the highly-polished bowl tenderly with the corner of his pocket handkerchief. Then he looked up at May, and she saw that his eyes were wet as hers had been.

"By God, I do love her," he said huskily. "I did n't know it was in me to love any one so—so much." He tried to laugh. "Why, I—I 'd think

nothing of dying," he said, "to save her little finger from a scratch. I don't suppose you understand. It sounds so drivelling when it 's put like that; but that 's the sort of way one feels. It 's—it 's just everything in the world."

May sat with her elbows on the table, beside the little silver tray and Dresden tea-set, and her chin resting in her hands. She looked into space and saw nothing, for her eyes were full of dreaming.

"I understand better than you think," she said.

"For Heaven's sake, leave me in peace, I 'm dangerous! Can't you see I 'm dangerous?" said Erica, from the depths of the big down pillows, piled on the historical bedstead in the state-room. "Surely you 've cried over me and congratulated me enough for one day."

Lady Clow shut the door, and advanced on tiptoe to her daughter's side.

She moved lightly, as many very stout people do; it was almost as though a balloon floated across the carpet and came to a standstill.

"My darling, it was not to congratulate you, only to say that Christopher has been writing to his lawyer——"

"What has he written to his lawyer about?"

"He did not tell me exactly what about."

"Was it worth while to wake me up to tell me nothing?"

"It was something about your marriage settlements, I believe," faltered poor Lady Clow. "He seems to be planning them already."

"Did you suppose, for an instant, I should marry without settlements?"

"His calling me was not to talk about the settle-

ments—that was only an excuse; he only mentioned them incidentally, as it were. It was to give me a cheque. He said I was n't to tell you anything about it, but that he knew you would be wanting to get your trousseau, and he was afraid of my being put to expense."

"What did he give you?"

Lady Clow held out her hand with a fluttering slip of paper.

"Five hundred pounds. I was ashamed to take so much. But we owe some money for the things you insisted on buying before we came here; and I am behindhand with the rent of the rooms. What could I do?"

Erica roused herself slightly.

"We 'll go up to London to-morrow," she said. "I want heaps of things. I 'll go up with Christopher, and May, and we 'll stop at a hotel. It will be all right with May to chaperon us. And I 'll keep him up there as long as he 'll consent to stay away from this place, and do all the shopping I want. There 'll be no need for you to come, mamma. You can stop where you are till we come back."

Lady Clow was thunderstruck.

"Erica," she wailed, "why should I not come? How can you be so selfish? I never pretended to like the country, and you know very well how I am longing to get back to London. What am I to do in this great, dark, empty place all by myself? I shall be terrified out of my wits. One would have thought a daughter would not care to leave her mother during the last days, the very last days of her girlhood," she murmured sadly to herself, relapsing into the third person, as was usual with her in moments of extreme dejection.

Nevertheless, Erica had her way; and she and Christopher and May, attended by Margery, and by Cloberry—without whom Christopher never stirred from home—all went up to the Ritz Hotel for the inside of a week. And when Erica came back to the Abbey—having ordered all the clothes she wanted for the moment—she wore on the third finger of her left hand a half-hoop of brilliants, and round her neck a long string of perfectly matched and spotless pearls; while carefully packed away in her trunk were two large white velvet cases, containing an emerald and diamond tiara and a necklace to match.

CHAPTER XVII

THE Abbey doors and windows stood open and silence reigned, for most of the household were up on the cricket-ground, where the last match of the Moreleigh season was being fought out.

Christopher's side had lost the toss and had had a long morning's fielding, while Burstin, stung by the recollection of past defeat, played steadily, if not brilliantly, and amassed a couple of hundred runs.

Captain Sandry, suave and confident, the hero of the last encounter between the rival teams, went in first accompanied by Christopher, and, to the dismay of his side, was clean bowled in the second over by the revengeful Levett. He retired, disconsolate. His immediate successors put on only thirty-five runs for five wickets, and the Burstin victory seemed assured, when Tom Garry joined Christopher, and the pair made an unexpected stand. Amid the joyful plaudits of the Moreleigh villagers the young Squire drove his first ball to the boundary, and thereafter hit one four after another, punishing the bowling of Levett to the amazement of all beholders.

"Lard, lard, Master Christopher du putt some beef into it. He du square his shoulders and lift the barl proper," said the village critics one to the other, lifting glad eyes to watch the flight of the cricket-ball over the heads of the onlookers.

Tom Garry, who lacked Christopher's strength, and was, moreover, generally counted as an unreliable and

uncertain bat, was on his mettle: his successful rival was the hero of the hour, and Erica was looking on.

He was missed once or twice, and once nearly contrived to run Christopher out, but luck was on his side, and the Burstin total was passed before they were parted. Tom came straight from his scattered wicket to Erica, who sat in the shade of a spreading oak, and threw himself down on the grass beside her, before the applause which greeted his total of sixty-seven runs had subsided.

"It 's the first time I 've ever been interested in a cricket match," she murmured.

"My innings was a series of flukes," he said, pulling at his black moustache rather savagely. "Thorverton 's playing like a book."

Erica shrugged her shoulders.

"All that is Greek to me."

Robin Garry took his brother's place; and full of the confidence begotten of victory, and in a sensational innings which afforded delight to the crowd, he knocked up twenty runs, and was given out leg-before-wicket by the Burstin umpire, to the discontent of Moreleigh.

Christopher presently carried his bat for ninety-eight runs.

"Care to go on?" he asked the captain of the opposing side. "Only half an hour left."

"Not worth while."

"Come on, then. Tea 's at the house, as usual."

"Bad luck, ol' man, missin' your century," said Joe Murch.

"Yes," said Chris, "don't suppose I shall ever get set like that again." And he strode off as his custom was, to avoid congratulations, and made for the Abbey, looking neither to the right nor to the left.

"Are n't you proud of him? Ninety-eight runs, and he practically never made a mistake!" said Kathleen Garry ecstatically to May. "I am beside myself with joy over Tom and his score—the biggest he ever made, for they only play him for his wicket-keeping."

"They were both splendid," said May. "I am so glad Moreleigh won after all. Let us hurry on and see about tea. Will you come, Erica?"

"I 'll follow you. I can't hurry in this weather," said Erica, rising very slowly from her chair.

Tom hurried off into the pavilion to pack his cricket-bag, after murmuring a request to Erica.

Kathleen and May started together and did not look back or they would have seen Robin saunter towards her.

"Let us avoid the first rush to the house for Heaven's sake," said Erica, looking at him—"the ringing for tea, and the shouting for whiskey-and-soda, and the swearing at Cloberry."

"Come round the plantation and down the hill through the glen by the lake," he said instantly.

They slipped away as quickly as possible, and by the time Tom appeared were out of sight. He looked about him, and then hurried towards the Abbey, along the direct way which had been taken by Kathleen and May.

Hidden by the plantation which sheltered the cricket-ground, Erica and Robin descended the road which wound through the hill-slopes of the park, to the level of the lake.

They looked upon the grey haze of the September afternoon, through which the distant woods were outlined mistily; at the brilliant green of the turf, nibbled closely by the deer; at the dark green of the forest trees, as yet untouched by any signs of autumn colouring.

The cooing of wood-pigeons alone broke a silence so profound that pheasants ran hither and thither across the ways, pecking and scattering little mounds of red earth in search of their prey.

Robin walked with his hands in the pockets of his blazer, kicking the stones in his path; with a rather queer expression upon his handsome, dark face, and his mouth pursed up as though he were tempted to whistle.

Erica glanced at him sideways, through her fringes of golden eyelash, and thought, as she had often thought lately, how favourably he contrasted with Christopher in appearance. She had a keen appreciation of the beautiful, and she liked Robin's slim figure, and clear brown complexion glowing with health, and his straight profile. But she liked better still the ease of his manner, the seductive intonations of his low voice, and the daring, merry glance of his soft, brown eyes.

Since they were now well in the shade of the oaks that fringed the still waters of the little lake, which lay to the north of the Abbey, he stopped, and without a word, boldly took her into his arms and kissed her.

"How dare you?" said Erica. "Christopher would kill you if he knew."

"You're not really going to throw yourself away on that fellow," said Robin confidently.

"It is very dishonourable of you to talk like that."

"My intentions are strictly honourable," said Robin; "throw him over and marry me."

He laughed at her, with his handsome mouth and his dark eyes, and Erica looked at him with those cold, light-blue eyes of hers, full of curiosity, and the subtle pleasure of the intriguer who meets his match.

"What would you say if I took you at your word, I wonder?" she said, in a mocking tone that belied the eager curiosity of her look.

"Try me and see," said Robin, and laughed again and kissed her again.

He was young and light-hearted, and willing to leave things to chance, and more than willing to kiss Erica as often as she would permit.

"Most of the Garrys have run away with other people's wives," he said. "I 'll run away with another man's *fiancée* for a change."

"And what are we to live on?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I have my allowance and I make a bit now and then. What 's the odds so long as we 're happy?"

"And you are four-and-twenty!"

"Five-and-twenty," he corrected her.

"You might be five years old," said Erica.

"Think what a glorious time we 'd have," he said, in coaxing tones. "Off to Paris for a month's honeymoon. I happen to be in funds for the moment."

"Christopher is going to take me to Paris."

"All right. If you 'd rather go with him than with me."

"He 's a great bore, but I 'm sorry for him sometimes," said Erica meditatively.

"I 'm sorrier for old Tom," said Robin. "He 's hard hit."

"If I did throw over Christopher I 'd rather marry Tom than you."

"Of course you would," said Robin, but the confident laughter of his eyes belied his words. "I 'm only a poor devil of a younger son."

"He 's no richer than you are."

"Still, he 's an eldest son, and he 'll inherit a fine

property even if it is heavily mortgaged. Those two things would help him to marry money, if you don't step in. If you do—" He shrugged his shoulders again.

"Why are you in love with me? What is there about me," said Erica curiously, "that makes you all more inclined to fall in love with me than, for instance, with little May? She's very pretty and sweet-tempered and intelligent. She knows more than I do about books, and things of that kind, and yet you all go for me instead of her. Why? Is it only my looks, I wonder?"

"You're fond of such analysis, aren't you?" said Robin. "I'm much too wise to tell you why. But I could say one thing which would make you angry."

"I don't think so. I don't care enough for you to be made angry by anything you say," she said calmly.

He laughed again. "Well, then, if I could have chosen I would rather have fallen in love with little Miss Thorverton than with you."

"Of course," said Erica, mocking him in her turn. "She has about six hundred a year of her own, and Chris goes about boasting she's to have twenty thousand pounds down on her wedding-day."

"I'm fonder of money than of anything else in the world," said Robin gravely, "but, oddly enough, I was n't thinking of money just then."

"Of course not. I know exactly what you were thinking of: that she would be a far nicer, better-behaved wife than I could ever be, and that she'd be devoted to you, and never fall in love with other men."

"Something of the kind." He laughed to himself, and Erica was nettled.

"Perhaps your thoughts were less complimentary to me than anything I have indicated."

"I said you 'd be angry."

"I don't care," said Erica. "You may think her everything in the world that I 'm not, but it 's me you want."

"Desperately," he said, "though your grammar is deplorable."

"And you hate yourself for wanting to marry me."

"I never hate myself, and I 'm always willing to pay for what I want. The price I grudge most in this case," he said slowly, "is the hurting of poor old Tom."

"If I married you it would hurt Christopher more than Tom."

"I don't care a damn about Christopher."

"Well, since we are so frank with each other, I may tell you at once that I am not dreaming of throwing away all that Christopher can give me for the sake of a month's paradise and a lifelong repentance with you."

"O-ho, you grant it would be a month's paradise!" said Robin with boyish triumph. "That would be something, anyway. You won't even get that with Thorverton. The lifelong repentance will begin right away. You could n't be in love with him, even for a month."

Erica looked at him with a scorn that emphasised the lovely curve of her red lips, and the superb outline of her white throat and lifted chin.

"I 'm not in love with you," she said calmly. "I have a fancy for you. I know the difference. You 're not the first man I 've had a fancy for, and you won't be the last. Love is a different thing."

"You are frank," he said, and looked at her with bold admiration.

"I speak the truth in season and out of season,"

she said, repeating her favourite formula rather defiantly.

"It is useful to establish a reputation for honesty," said Robin, mocking her. "You speak the truth when it suits you, my angel. I don't suppose you will go in and proclaim it now to Thorverton, in the presence of the assembled cricketers."

Erica had a sense of humour, and it was, moreover, a kind of relief to be understood. She met Robin on an even footing; there were no illusions on either side. She recognised a certain restfulness in the situation.

"Whether I proclaim the truth or no, I am going in," she said. "I am not going to make talk. Mine enemy is always at Christopher's right hand, ready to whisper calumny."

"Who is your enemy? Tell me that I may slay him."

"I wish you would. It 's Sandry, the agent. He is an underhand, scheming, revengeful brute, and I 've scored off him too often. I thought I could persuade Chris to dismiss him, but hitherto have I failed, for he has a foolish habit of clinging to any one he believes to be a friend."

"How extraordinarily out of date!" said Robin. "I agree with you, however, that Sandry is a bounder. Don't let 's waste time talking of him."

The sound of a horse caused them to start.

Anthony Denys was riding down the road by which they had descended to the little glade by the lake. He did not check the speed of his black horse as he passed, and barely glanced towards the couple strolling in the shadow of the oaks. He touched his cap and rode on.

"Did he recognise us?" asked Erica.

"I don't think so, and if he did what matter? I am merely escorting you home by a somewhat circuitous route, and a more discreet and silent witness than old Anthony never breathed."

"He is a prig of prigs."

"I never heard that of him before," said Robin surprised. "And I 've known him all my life,—as a youngster knows a man of that age, of course. He minds nobody's business but his own, and he 's got the reputation of never having been heard to say a word against anybody."

"What a dull reputation to have!"

Robin whistled.

"Useful in this instance. Poor old Denys. So he 's had the misfortune to offend you—or is it that he 's the solitary exception to the rule that brings every male human being to your feet?"

"He has painted my portrait."

"The deuce he has!"

"He says it 's the best thing he ever did."

"Does he? Confound him!" said Robin heartily. He was surprised, but the strength of Erica's attraction for himself made him the readier to draw the inference she intended him to draw from her words.

Erica laughed silently, but Robin was as quick as Christopher was slow, and caught the glint of her eye.

"But if he has succumbed to your charms, why then are you angry with him?" he said mockingly.

"I wish he had n't happened to pass just now," was Erica's inconsequent reply.

"At any rate he 's gone, and that being so, we are quite safe, and I 'm going to kiss you again."

"It 's for the last time, then," said Erica.

They parted in the glade, and Robin went off

whistling, and entered the house by the front door, while Erica slipped round through the shrubbery to a garden entrance, and up to her own room. Here she delayed for a few moments, taking off her hat and smoothing her ruffled hair; and she looked into her mother's room and found Lady Clow, exhausted with her walk from the cricket-ground, fast asleep in an arm-chair by the window.

When she came slowly into the hall, the cricketers' tea was nearly over.

Robin, seated between May and Kathleen, was making them both laugh, and talking merrily, as was his wont; he scarcely looked up at Erica's entry.

"May I bring you some tea, Miss Clow?" said Tom's voice in her ear as she sat down.

His young, brown face was pale and reproachful. He was less attractive to her than his brother because he had cultivated his good looks less, and did not affect a crop of curly hair, like Robin, and took life more seriously.

But still, he was handsome, as became a Garry, and the downward line of his slight dark moustache lent him an air of not unpleasing melancholy.

"I thought you would have waited for me," he said, subsiding into the chair next her, and speaking in an undertone.

"I purposely and ostentatiously went off with Robin," said Erica, deciding that frankness was her best policy. "I thought Chris was inclined to be fractious at our sitting together, so on the impulse of the moment I turned and asked Robin to walk the long way round. But I did n't want all the cricketers to see us come in together, so I went up to see mamma, who hates the noise of these big teas, and was resting quietly in her room."

"Was that how it was?" said Tom, and his brow cleared. "I thought you were flirting with Robin, and I wanted to murder him."

Erica did not reply in words. She directed his eyes, with a glance of her own, towards Robin, who was bending over May with an air of tenderness, not altogether assumed, as Erica jealously perceived.

"I know," said Tom.

"Lady Erriff has made her wishes pretty clear on several occasions," said Erica in a confidential whisper. "She wants it to be Robin, doesn't she? But I will tell you something. Christopher wants it to be you."

"I don't see why he wants anything of the kind," said Tom, rather crossly. "Anyway, it never will be me. And why can't they leave the poor little girl to settle her affairs for herself?"

"Chris likes you better than Robin."

"I wish he didn't then," said Tom uncomfortably. "He's always going out of his way to be civil to me, poor chap, not dreaming I can hardly keep my hands off him sometimes. The whole thing makes me feel a dishonourable brute, and I hate it."

"What can I do? You wouldn't have me break my word?" she murmured.

"I'd have you go straight to him and tell him you don't love him."

"He knows that; I practically told him so when I accepted him."

"How a fellow can want to marry a girl who doesn't care for him, I can't think," said Tom. "The only other thing is to go one better, and tell him you love somebody else."

"What's the good?"

"Erica!"

"Do you think I'd let you ruin your prospects?"

Erica spoke dramatically. She entered into her part and enjoyed it.

"That 's for me to consider," said Tom manfully.

"What would your people say?"

"That, too, is my affair. I shall marry to please myself, not my people."

"Some day I will tell you why I accepted Christopher," said Erica in mournful tones.

"Tell me now," urged Tom. "I 've never been able to understand it. You 're not the sort of girl who would marry for money, and though I feel a brute to say so, he 's not—quite——"

She shook her head.

"This is not the time nor the place. I shall see you again. Now please go away, and don't talk to me any more. I don't want to hurt him more than I can help."

After dinner Christopher fell asleep in the banqueting-hall before the great fire of logs which he had ordered to be lighted, for the September evening was chilly.

He lay back in a low arm-chair, his head resting on a cushion, his chin tilted upwards, his mouth a little open, and his nerveless hand dropped upon the head of his great Newfoundland dog, which slept beside him with its nose buried between its shaggy forefeet. An empty tumbler stood upon the table at his elbow.

Joe Murch and Captain Sandry were in the billiard-room, and May was silently holding skeins of wool for Lady Clow, whose fat hands wound off one ball after another with slow exactitude.

The lovers had hitherto betaken themselves to the garden after dinner, for Christopher loved the open air, and Erica was resolute in forcing herself to

walk, however slowly, in order to keep down her ever-increasing weight.

But a hard day's cricketing, and the sudden uprising of a cold wind, had inclined Chris towards remaining indoors, and the chair before the log-fire was inviting. A new toy had arrived from London in the shape of a gramophone; and after a selection of music-hall ditties had been sung in a loud and grating voice, an orchestra was set to play. Presently its hoarse and muffled strains were accompanied by the regular, heavy breathing which announced that Christopher was asleep.

The gramophone ceased, and Erica, in a clinging moss-green chiffon robe, with silver girdle outlining her shapely form and long limbs, leant against the carven black pillars of the high mantel-shelf, and looked disdainfully down upon her sleeping lover.

The soft, green transparent drapery falling from her rounded shoulders and beautifully moulded arms and bosom emphasised the extraordinary whiteness and purity of her skin, and the ruddy, leaping flames of the log-fire lent a deeper glow to her loosely twisted hair.

She thought of Robin's ardent love-making, the glance of his long-lashed eyes—beautiful as a woman's, but bold as a man's—of his daring that held nothing of vulgar presumption, and his gaiety which was so unlike poor Christopher's occasional attempts to be funny.

She thought how bored and impatient she was in the company of her betrothed, while with Robin she was amused, charmed, offended, and disarmed, by turn, and almost in a breath.

And she thought how unlovely Christopher looked as he lay in that profound stupor of sleep, which was partly induced by fatigue and partly by alcohol.

The sullen lines of his face were illumined by the firelight, and his blunt features were red and shiny, partly from a too heavy meal, and partly from exposure to the sun.

The half-open mouth lent an expression of stupidity to a countenance which did not need that additional touch to render it unattractive.

It angered Erica that she should have put on that new, exquisite chiffon tea-gown to so little purpose.

Lady Clow had shaken her head over it and declared it was shockingly *décolleté*. Captain Sandry had glanced it over with that sardonic half-smile which he had worn rather often of late, and which displeased her excessively. May had said nothing, and probably thought nothing of it. She was accustomed to see Erica—and more especially since her engagement—in every variety of exaggerated fashion; yet in her presence Erica had realised suddenly that she was overdressed, and the consciousness irritated her.

Christopher had certainly looked at her with the usual pride and admiration shining from his eyes, when she entered the hall; but his utmost powers of expression were limited to his favourite ejaculation, and having exclaimed "By Jove!" once, he exclaimed no more. He had devoted himself exclusively to his dinner, guffawed once or twice over the gramophone, and then settled himself comfortably down to sleep.

Erica fell to wondering what existence would be like, after all, as Christopher's wife. Did he suppose that she would be contented to spend the rest of her days at the Abbey, dispensing tea to cricketers, sitting in a field whilst he ran up and down with a bat or scampered after a ball, driving about the country in motors and dog-carts, tramping over wet earth with the guns, pottering about the garden with him

while he smoked his eternal pipe in a silence scarcely broken, watching him play interminable games of billiards, watching him drink endless tumblers of whiskey-and-soda?

She knew that Christopher supposed she was ready and willing, nay, yearning and anxious, to lead this life, and that she herself had led him to suppose so. But she was beginning to realise that the monotony of it would be unendurable, and that she was scarcely able to bear it even now.

She looked at the half-hoop of diamonds on the third finger of her left hand, and turned it about to catch the reflection of the flames, so that it flashed forth a thousand brilliant sparks. She lifted the string of pearls which hung to her waist, and which she loved as most women love jewels; especially women who are at once passionate, vain, and avaricious, and attracted, as Erica was, towards material beauty in every shape and form.

If she threw Christopher over, would he insist upon her returning his gifts?

The Christopher who loved her would not; but she had to reckon always with that Christopher who was not only a love-sick boy, but also the shrewd descendant of a line of tradesmen, of whose existence she had been uncomfortably aware more than once.

Herein, she knew instinctively, lay the difference between Christopher and the young Garrys.

Had Tom Garry been in question, she would not have wondered. Even Robin, the daring and outspoken, would have shrugged his shoulders and never seemed to remember the value of the jewels—which was, in truth, so great that the knowledge of it almost frightened her. But of Christopher, whom she was conscious of not perfectly understanding, Erica

did not feel so sure; and the uncertainty counted for much in her mind.

She could not bear the thought of giving up the pearls, diamonds, and emeralds he had showered upon his future wife; and she could not bear the thought, as she looked upon Christopher, slumbering in the firelight, that she was his future wife.

Discontent furrowed her white brow, and made the corners of her beautiful mouth droop, and lent sombreness to her light, watchful eyes.

Christopher woke, yawned, and stretched himself without apology.

He stared about him, blinked, and rubbed his eyes with a laugh.

"I say! By Jove, I 've been asleep!" he said, jumping out of his chair. "Come on, Erica, let 's go and see how Sandry and old Joe are getting on with the billiards, shall we?"

"Are you sure you don't want another whiskey-and-soda?" said Erica.

CHAPTER XVIII

"THIS is a real West Country day; and where would you get such weather anywhere else in October? Pleasanter to sit out of doors than to stay within. We might be in Ireland," said Kathleen Garry.

She wore brown, laced boots, and a heather-coloured shooting-dress, very neat and trim and short, and belted at her slender waist with leather; and in her brown cap was stuck a little red feather, which became her dark hair, and her brown eyes, and clear brown complexion.

She was spending the day at Moreleigh; and she and Erica and May had come out to meet the guns, and to walk with them for the rest of the afternoon. They lunched in an open tent that was pitched on the confines of the Abbey pleasure-grounds, close to the woods.

On the one hand stretched the sunlit gardens, where round beds and ribbon borders of glowing geraniums and golden calceolarias, dwarf-roses, and purple heliotrope were stiffly laid out on either side of the gravel walks; and broad lawns, whereon the dish-washers ran hither and thither with white breasts and flapping tails, dipping their long feathers in and out of the wet grass as they went. On the other side the fallow deer browsed under the horse-chestnuts of the park; the rooks cawed faintly from distant groups of tall, ragged elms; and close at hand, beneath the spreading branches of a mighty cedar, lay

rows of slaughtered pheasants and partridges and rabbits.

The sunshine of summer was wedded to the cool breath of autumn, and peace profound and stillness reigned, rather emphasised than broken by the ripple of young voices and the sound of young laughter from the tent.

From the keepers, picturesquely grouped beneath the cedar, where they kept guard over dogs, game, and guns alike, came a low rumble of conversation.

Erica was already annoyed with Christopher, who sat next her; first, because he had ejaculated "By Jove!" upon beholding Kathleen, and secondly because he had followed up this indiscretion by whispering, "Look here, I say, Erica. That's the way to get yourself up next time you come out with us. See? Mind you, *she* knows. Ripping, isn't she? You're too fine by half."

She was annoyed, partly because she knew he was right, and partly because she had been particularly pleased with her own dress until Kathleen appeared, when it was too late to make any change.

"I am not going to walk with you this afternoon," she said coldly. "That is why I am not got up like Kathleen."

"I say!" said Chris disappointed. "But you were no end keen this morning."

"Am I never to be allowed to change my mind?" said Erica impatiently. "I'm tired, as it happens."

"You don't look tired," he said tenderly. "You look like—like—a rose." He was so much struck with the brilliancy of this simile that he could not help repeating it. "Yes, that's what you look like—a rose. That green velvet is becoming enough, if only it was suitable. I say, it would look fine in comic

opera. What? Look here. How would it be if I did n't go out this afternoon? Anthony 's here to do the civil to old Erriff and all that, and Sandry can shepherd 'em, as he always does; and you and I could go for a spin in the car. I 'm shooting frightfully badly not that I ever shoot well. But those two chaps are so good it makes me feel rotten."

He helped himself to cherry brandy with a hand that shook, as the hand of a lad of two-and-twenty should not shake.

"It would be much better for you to stick to the others, and I shall be all right by tea-time," said Erica.

Her tone was cold, for Christopher's criticism had wounded her vanity; and, since this was inordinate, her resentment was out of proportion to his offence.

"Shall you want me this afternoon, Christie?" said Captain Sandry, taking the opportunity to speak confidentially, as he helped himself to game pie at Christopher's elbow. "If not, I 'll knock off after luncheon, if I may. I 've got a lot of business in hand."

"Do as you like," said Chris, in his sulky tone, that was like that of a spoilt boy. "It seems to me nobody wants to come. If Anthony 's here, of course it 's all right your chucking, but if he 's going home I 'm not going to be left alone to look after things."

Anthony, it appeared, had no intention of deserting. He sat at the further end of the board, and ladled Irish stew from an enormous earthen porringer, and listened to Kathleen's chatter, and her boasting of the West Country climate with a smile. He was not obliged to exert himself to invent replies to her conversation, since she seldom stopped for an answer.

Robin was as usual devoting himself ostentatiously to May, with a keen glance now and then to spare for that opposite end of the table, where the engaged couple sat side by side obviously not on the best of terms.

Lady Clow disliked lunching out of doors excessively; she pleaded first rheumatism, and then the fear of neuralgia, but her daughter proved relentless, and declined to permit her to remain indoors.

"There are occasions when you ought to appear, and this is one of them," said Erica. "What would Lord Erriff think? This is practically my first introduction to him. He has never been over to shoot here before, and naturally Chris is most anxious everything should be in order."

So Lady Clow, wrapped in an old-fashioned sealskin coat, much the worse for wear, with a Shetland veil tied round a flowered bonnet, balanced herself nervously on the strongest camp-stool she could find, and tried to console herself for the certainty that she was catching cold by eating rather more than usual.

Between Erica and her mother sat Lord Erriff, taking it in turns to make himself agreeable to each. He pleaded so earnestly with Erica that she presently relented, and rescinded her resolution to return to the house.

"Do you know that I came over here for the express purpose of making your acquaintance?" he said, with a glance of his still brilliant brown eyes, that was not so very unlike the glances his son Robin now and then shot across the table at Miss Clow.

His own tenants and humbler neighbours were often heard to say that Lord Erriff "had a way with him," like his predecessor, Handsome Jack, who was still fondly and regretfully remembered, and though he

was by no means the splendid specimen of manhood that his elder brother had been in appearance, he was excessively popular, and everywhere regarded as an excellent sportsman and a good fellow.

Erica's ill-humour thawed rapidly under the influences of his charm and his admiration, and the pleasant conviction that Tom Garry was indignant with his father for occupying the place he coveted next to her, and that Robin's attention was likewise in reality fixed upon her, although he was outwardly engrossed in converse with May.

She leant towards her neighbour, and spoke in a confidential undertone.

"Tell me, is my dress all wrong? You see I live in London, and hardly ever pay country-house visits, and then only in the summer; so how should I know? Christopher has made me feel so uncomfortable by laughing at me. That is why I said I would not come."

But Lord Erriff was much too wise to find fault with any woman's dress, knowing very well that when criticism comes in at the door, friendship is apt to fly out of the window; and, being much struck with the extraordinary purity of Erica's complexion, he was minded, for the moment, to make friends with her.

"My dear young lady," he said, half paternally, half gallantly, "you must not ask an old fellow whose eyes are dazzled to find fault with the vision that has dazzled them. Since you ask my opinion of your dress, let me answer, at once, that I have never in my life seen anything half so pretty. You are Diana come to life, or shall we say Maid Marian?—or any goddess of the woods you may choose to select. In any case, he is a very lucky man at whose elbow you elect to walk for the rest of the afternoon,

and I suppose there is no doubt as to who that will be."

"I think I shall come with you," said Erica, and, though Lord Erriff much preferred to be left alone with his loader, he expressed himself, of course, as highly delighted.

In the end, Erica naturally stood next to Christopher, and the badness of his shooting added to her discontent with him, while the perception of this fact increased his nervousness.

On this occasion her boasted habit of speaking truth, in and out of season, annoyed her betrothed husband considerably.

She exclaimed with pleasure and admiration when Anthony, with a right and left, brought down a brace of high-flying birds, and she said, "Why do you never hit anything?" when Christopher missed shot after shot. "Why does Anthony hit whatever he aims at if you can't? Why do you let him get everything?"

"Because he's a good shot and I'm not," said Christopher sullenly.

Captain Sandry generally kept out of Christopher's way on such occasions as much as possible, for the boy's uncertain temper was less to be depended upon than ever when he was nervous; but the keepers winked behind the young Squire's back, and reminded each other that Master Christopher had been known to throw down his gun and stamp upon it.

"As for that there Joe Murch," they declared, "he did arter be labelled dangerous. Putt 'un where us will, and wi' tu on us tu luke arter he, him did n't arter be let loose wi' a gun in 's hand. One of these days there 'll be a accident."

Joe Murch had divined their opinion of him, which indeed they did not take much trouble to conceal, and

bore himself with propitiatory meekness; knowing he would invariably be put in the worst place, and resentful never.

He enjoyed the walk and the luncheon, and above all the thirst they induced, so that he was more than willing to efface himself, and do what he was told, and to tip the keepers as little as possible.

Erica decided that after she was married she would walk with the guns no more. It became apparent to her that men bent on killing pheasants and partridges had little attention to spare for the ladies looking on, and that tramping over rough ground made her hot and tired, while standing still made her cold and tired.

The walk home brought some consolation.

A rearrangement of the party sent Kathleen Garry to Christopher's side, and since she had a kind little heart, and plenty of tact, and since she knew that he had shot badly, and was consequently depressed, she set herself to amuse and cheer him, with so much success that he almost forgot to look round for Erica.

When he did so he perceived that she appeared to be in high spirits, walking between Lord Erriff and Robin, and evidently entertaining them both. The certainty that her good humour was restored, no less than Kathleen's conversation, made Christopher forget his own depression.

Tom Garry walked alone, with his eyes on the ground and his gun on his shoulder; and Christopher believed he knew the cause of his obviously low spirits.

"Poor devil," he thought, with a shrug of commiseration. "He tries to avoid her. I 'm sorrier for him than he knows. I wish he would n't come over here at all. She only laughs at him, and I know what

it's like for her to do that, even when she's fond of a fellow."

He had gone out of his way to pay clumsy attention to Tom more than once during the day; and had given directions that, next to his father, young Garry was to have the best places, which would otherwise have fallen to Anthony's share; and he had no idea how Tom writhed under these well-meant, humble efforts to show him friendship and sympathy.

When Christopher was possessed by an idea it was apt to escape him in conversation.

"Your brother has been down here a good bit lately. I suppose chaps in the Guards get as much leave as they like?" he said awkwardly.

"No, indeed. He rushes down by the night-train, and is most uncertain. Often when we expect him we get a wire instead to say he can't come. But we ought not to complain, for it's something they should both be no farther off than London, where we can see them every day in the season, and where they are always liable to turn up here."

"I should hate to live in London," was Christopher's comment.

"You can't hate London more than I do!" cried Kathleen.

He walked fast, but she was light and active, and kept pace with him easily, so that they presently outdistanced the rest of the party.

He found himself looking down approvingly on Kathleen, at her short skirt and neat, thick boots; even, half-unconsciously, wishing that Erica could walk with him like this, for her sauntering footsteps were a trial to the country-bred boy.

"But she'll get out of her town ways," he reflected, excusing her in his thoughts.

"I did n't suppose girls ever hated London. There are shops and theatres and all sorts of things to amuse them."

"But when one prefers outdoor things," said Kathleen, with her little brown face and great bright eyes smiling up at him.

"By Jove, she 's a dear little girl! I wish Erica would make friends with her," thought the simple youth; and he remembered that he had often admired Kathleen in the hunting-field, as a little girl, when, mounted on her chestnut mare, and with dark hair blowing in the wind, she had flown over her fences like a bird.

"Why don't you start golf-links here, Mr. Thorverton?" she asked. "The park would be splendid."

"There 's the deer. And, besides, I hate golf."

"But you 'll have to begin it some day. One can't play cricket for ever. That 's what daddy 's always preaching to the boys. They are cricket-mad, though neither of them bat like you. It was a shame you were n't allowed to make your century the other day."

"If Dr. Dobree could have kept up his wicket five minutes longer, I dare say I might have pulled it off," said Christopher, well-pleased. "But he did n't stay long enough to get his eye in; the afternoon sun did for him."

"I never saw any one play with such a crooked bat," said Kathleen, shaking her head. "I wonder he plays at all."

"Well, he always insists on going in last, poor chap, and he 's not so bad in the field," said Chris.

His good humour was completely restored, for Kathleen's skilful reminder that, though he could not shoot, he could play cricket, revived his self-confidence. He began to cast about in his mind what he could do

to give pleasure to his kind little companion, in return for the interest she was showing in him and his favourite pursuits.

"I say, some one told me you were n't going to hunt this season. Is it true?" he asked suddenly.

"Oh, I shall get a day when I can! But, you see —it 's rather difficult—with so many of us—and we 've started a motor," said Kathleen. "You see, there 's daddy and the boys—and my old gee died, worse luck!"

"Look here, I say," said Christopher, "if ever you want a mount—if you won't think it cheek on my part," he stammered, with more than his accustomed awkwardness—"there 's all the hunters over here eating their heads off, and you could send me a message at any time."

"Oh," cried Kathleen, with sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks, "how very kind of you!" She showed no embarrassment, and accepted the offer as frankly as he had wished she would, and felt sure she would not. "Oh, Mr. Thorverton, that is most awfully kind of you! I should love it better than anything in the world," she cried.

"That 's all right," said Christopher, much relieved.

"Of course I must ask mummy, but I 'll get round daddy first," she said joyously, "and then I hope it will be all right. And I don't know how to thank you enough for even thinking of such a delightful thing."

In the end Christopher arrived at the Abbey in the highest spirits, in spite of his bad day's shooting, pleased beyond measure with himself and his companion, and equally delighted with his own kind thought, and her eagerness to accept the favour he desired to bestow upon her.

It was already dusk by the time they entered the

banqueting-hall, where tea was spread before the log-fire, and Lady Clow was ensconced upon the sofa, anxiously awaiting the return of the shooting-party.

As soon as they had assured her that no one had been killed, or even wounded, during the whole afternoon, her anxiety subsided; and she was able to enjoy her hot muffin and several cups of tea, since Christopher rang immediately upon arrival for Cloberry and the urn, boldly announcing his resolve not to wait for anybody.

May walked with Anthony in the gathering dusk, at a little distance behind the trio, whose lingering footsteps Mr. Denys did not apparently care to overtake.

They went but slowly, since it was Erica who set the pace, and, with her high-heeled shoes, and the folds of a velvet skirt to be held out of the mud, she was heavily handicapped.

Robin wished his father away, and perhaps Erica, too, desired Lord Erriff's absence; nevertheless, his attentions could not but gratify her vanity, and she was very well amused, and ready to make the walk last as long as possible.

"Chris and Erica have settled to be married in December," said May.

"Then you will come to us, I hope?"

"I should like to come while they are away on their honeymoon. Erica wants to go abroad, and Christopher says that it would be very convenient not to be here at Christmas since he could not well have the usual festivities. But apparently he does not intend to be away very long, on account of the hunting; and I do not know quite what I ought to do when they come back. Chris wants me to return to the

Abbey, and Cousin Rosabelle says newly-married people should be left alone."

"I think you should do what you like best," said Anthony.

"I thought you would advise me," she said ingenuously.

It was not so dark but that she could see his very kind and gentle smile. "But I am an interested party."

"Please tell me what you think."

He paused, as his habit was, before replying.

"I cannot see why you must decide now. Take time and think it over. If you come to us—as I hope you will—while your brother is absent on his honeymoon, you can see how you like living at the Manor House, and then you can make up your mind whether it is best to remain at the Abbey or not."

May was immediately struck by the justice of this pronouncement.

"Very well," she said, "but I know I shall like the Manor House." Presently she added in a low voice, "Though it is strange that I never realise mamma's presence there as I do at the Abbey. In my sitting-room there everything speaks to me of her. I recognise her touch everywhere, in the collection of her treasures, the choice of her books, the arrangement of the furniture."

"You must remember that she took all her possessions with her when she quitted the Manor House. There is nothing of hers, naturally, left there."

"Yes, and she was only a girl then; while in my room, that was hers, are all the mementoes of Christopher's childhood and mine. It was so strange to come upon them. She must have left very hurriedly——"

Anthony was silent.

"I believe it is only the thought of leaving that room, which to me is the heart of the Abbey, that makes me hesitate to accept Cousin Rosabelle's kind, kind offer to give me a home at the Manor House, for I am sure Christopher will not really want me when he is married, and still more sure that Erica won't. And when even the pretence of housekeeping is taken away from me, as it naturally will be, then I shall have nothing to do, whereas you would always find something for me to do at the Manor House, would n't you?" she said wistfully. "I believe that is what I care for most."

"I have long known that occupation is the only thing that makes life worth living," said Anthony gently, "but you are very young to have found this out, and to place your highest happiness in work."

"I do not place my highest happiness in it," she said instantly, "for I have known a better thing."

"What better thing?"

"Companionship. It is that which is the best of all. I know that occupation of some kind is essential to happiness—mamma always said so—but even work may be sad when one works all alone, with no one to help, nor to praise, nor to care very much what one is doing. I may be young," said May, in rather mortified tones, but with an intensity of conviction that was, in fact, pathetic, when taken in conjunction with the fewness of her years, "but I speak from experience, for ever since I can remember I have been mamma's companion."

"You mean you were always with her?"

"I mean much more than that."

He looked down upon her, his grave face attentive, and his manner that of one who waited for an explanation.

"I mean," said May, with swelling heart, and with the tenderness of many memories rushing upon her, making her voice soft and her eyes wet, "that, so far back as I can remember, she must have trained me to be her companion. She never saw anything beautiful—not a picture, not a sunset, not a view, not even a pretty face—without wanting me to see it too. She never heard anything that amused or interested her without wishing me to share in her interest or amusement, so far as I was able. She never read anything she liked without reading or explaining it to me, from the moment I was old enough to understand. And she told me herself that she never really enjoyed any outing or merry-making that I did not share. Poor darling, she had few enough of such pleasures. But we did go to theatres sometimes, and to operas and concerts often. But what I am trying to tell you is that we grew to understand each other so well that we scarcely needed words at last. We looked at each other when things happened, and each knew what the other was thinking. And all this besides our love, which made us happy together and miserable when we were parted even for a few hours; and each so anxious to save the other from every trouble or pain, and take it herself; and each wanting to give the other the best of everything, and nurse her when she was ill, and comfort her when she was sad. I dare say I am mixing it all up very badly," said May, rather breathlessly, and half-crying, "but I don't know how to say in words what mamma and I were to each other. Only, whether I have said it so that you can understand me or not, that is what I mean by companionship."

"I understand it very well," said Anthony gently.

"I dare say it may have made me dull, and old-

fashioned," said poor May, rather proudly. "Cousin Rosabelle says I am a little old woman. You see, I have never lived with people of my own age, and so I do not understand their ways. And besides, I am naturally serious. Mamma used to say so. You, who remember her, will remember that she was always gay and bright and happy. But no one ever talks to me of her," she said, half sighing, "except now and then Cousin Rosabelle."

Anthony appeared to rouse himself from a reverie into which he had fallen.

"If we do not speak of her," he said, in a low voice, "it is because the loss of her, to us, was so great a grief that we could not bear to dwell upon it; and thus, for fear of reminding each other, the habit grew upon us of avoiding the mention of her name. Our silence has never meant that she was forgotten."

He paused, and said with an earnestness that thrilled May:

"I understand what you have said of your mother's companionship, because she was to me—in my boyhood—the only real companion I ever knew."

May listened in breathless interest, and with something very like a sob of gratitude and pleasure. She looked up at him, but in the gathering dusk she could no longer see the expression of his face.

"I find it hard to tell you what she was to me," said Anthony, in his low, measured tones. "I have never, I believe, spoken of it to any human being; but to you I could speak of her as I could to no one else, since you are her child—if you like to hear——"

"Oh, if you would—" May hardly breathed.

"To make you understand I should have to explain,"

he said apologetically; and she uttered a sound so expressive of interest and entreaty that he apologised no more. "From the time we lost the Abbey my father was, as I dare say you have heard, a broken-hearted man; and, though my mother never complained, I knew that the loss was always present to her mind. I had not been old enough when we left our home, or had not, perhaps, sufficient imagination, to feel the change to the Manor House as they did; on the contrary, I found that I had a greater freedom there in many ways that a boy values—being able, for instance, to run in and out of the cottage in a way I was not able to run in and out of the great house. I suppose I was a selfish boy; anyway, I know that I resented the constant melancholy, the silent regrets, that possessed both my parents, so that my holidays were made melancholy, too. This I say in order that you may understand how things were with us."

"The atmosphere," May said softly.

"The atmosphere, yes," he said. "The atmosphere of wounded pride and dignity always looking for slights, and heavy sense of failure, that oppressed my poor father."

"Yet he was a distinguished man!" she cried indignantly.

"You understand, then," said Anthony, as though surprised, and yet gratefully. "Yes. He was a distinguished man, and had been a fine soldier and a hero in his day. It is true that he did not understand business, and true that he was extravagant, and from these two causes he lost the estate—which was already heavily involved when it became his—and had to retire into comparative poverty. But I thought then, and I think now, that—compared with the

honourable work of his lifetime, and the reputation he had gained as a soldier,—this misfortune was a small thing."

"I think so too," said May.

"My father did not, and my mother did not; and I was a disappointment to both, because I could not show, since I did not feel, any great unhappiness in the loss of my inheritance. In fact, I could have been perfectly happy at the Manor House had it not been for the atmosphere of which I have spoken, and the knowledge that something was expected of me which I had no power to give. As it was, I was not happy," he said, with a simplicity that held no inflection of complaint, "at the time when Elizabeth came to us."

He spoke the name as though he loved it, and May held her breath.

"She came to us with a great reputation for cleverness from her French school; and, though she was only sixteen, she brought home every prize that she could by any possibility have won, and was already quite an accomplished little artist and musician, and a wonderful linguist."

"Indeed, indeed she was!" cried May.

"My terror at the notion of such a prodigy coming to take up her abode among us it is impossible to describe," said Anthony, in a dry, humorous tone. "And I will tell you a curious coincidence. I remember that the first time I saw her she walked into the room when I was tuning my fiddle, just as you did."

May's heart beat fast; not at the coincidence described, but at the astonishing inference that Anthony remembered the occasion and circumstances of their first meeting as clearly as she did.

"I was very little younger than Elizabeth," con-

tinued Anthony, "in actual years, but half a lifetime in development and self-possession. I was also very shy, and she seemed to me then, and now on looking back, already a woman, and a very remarkable one, though she was only sixteen. She took herself more seriously then, no doubt, than she did later on. I know she treated me like a very young child, but somehow I did not resent it—I suppose because she was so pretty and so clever. She showed me, then and there, how to hold my fiddle properly, for I was self-taught; and she played an accompaniment for me, which no one had ever done before. You can imagine I was very grateful."

"I can imagine how she liked to do it, too," said May happily.

"Yes, she entered into all my little jobs, just as you do," he said slowly. "She taught me to draw, and to paint in water-colours, and encouraged me to think well of my work. I had been in the habit of hiding my occupations, which were deemed a waste of time; but Elizabeth hid nothing. She came—dancing, as it were—into our lives," he said half apologetically. May's low laugh sounded in the darkness, a little tender laugh of memory.

"Oh, please, please go on!" she said.

"The extraordinary thing is, that though we were all so different—though none of us were companions to each other—we each found a companion in her. She sang and played and drew with me in my workshop; she rode and walked with my father, and sympathised passionately with him over the loss of the Abbey; she played picquet with him in the evenings, and made his grey days bright; she read and philosophised with my mother, helped her to build her castles in the air, and worked with her in the garden, which

was the greatest pleasure left her. She sewed and made her own dresses, and pretended she did not know what to do with her dress allowance, that it might not be deducted from the sum allowed by the Court to my parents for her maintenance."

"And why not?" cried May. "What did she care for money?"

"Nothing," he said in a low voice, "and less than nothing. And that was one of her great attractions for me, who, from the time I could remember anything, had heard nothing but lamentations over the want of it, and knew that my poor father's life was spoilt by the conviction that he had ruined me. He could never look at me without a sigh, until Elizabeth came. Then it was all changed. She seemed to draw us towards each other, to hold us together, as it were, by the strength of her marvellous understanding of each one of us. It is extraordinary what the effect of a single personality may be in a household," he said musingly, "to trouble it, or the reverse. Those were my four happiest years. Instead of dreading the holidays, I looked forward to them."

"And then?" she asked timidly as he ended.

"She married, and so we lost her," he said simply; as his mother had once said to May.

They had reached the drive, and the dark forms of the deer moving among the trees were visible. The open door of the lighted hall threw a square patch of brilliancy upon the space before the Abbey, chequered by the shadowed pattern of the iron gates before the enclosed porch and steps.

"I had known, of course, that she would marry, since every one who saw her loved her," said Anthony. "But I had hoped it would not be for many years."

The air seemed fraught with questioning, though

May uttered no words. Her parted lips were dry; her eyes looking up at him, through the darkness, sought the answering thought to hers, and, perhaps unconsciously impelled thereby, Anthony set her mind at rest.

"I was never, I believe," he said, rather hurriedly, "the least in love with her, in the ordinary sense of the word; but I believe also that my feeling towards her made it difficult for me to be greatly attracted towards any one else. I never found any one who seemed to me at all her equal," he said, very simply. "I saw, as it fell out, very little of her, after her marriage; but during those four years of her girlhood she had been to me a sister, a playmate, and a guardian angel all in one."

"But that is what she was to me, too," cried May, with a kind of soft passion; "all that you have said, and, besides all that, and beyond all that—my mother, and the ideal companion that neither you nor I will ever find again in all the world."

"I wonder," said Anthony very deliberately and questioningly.

He stopped for one moment before they entered the light, and took the little hand that seemed not unwilling to be taken, and lifted it gently to his lips.

It was as though he had said to her in words: *We have spoken in the darkness together of something very sacred to us both, something of which we could have spoken to no one else, but to each other only, and the knowledge of this will be a bond between you and me for evermore.*

CHAPTER XIX

OCTOBER was drawing to a close.

Erica had stolen away from a little party, which was gathered together in May's sitting-room upstairs for the purpose of hearing Kathleen Garry sing Irish melodies and old English ballads to the accompaniment of her banjo, and had hidden herself in Christopher's study, behind one of the heavy velvet curtains which hung across the bow-window. Here she found a low chair, and ensconced herself therein.

She heard Christopher calling her, and knew by the sudden bang of a door that he was annoyed at being unable to find her, had given up the search, and had himself been drawn into the little circle of listeners, which included Margery and Mrs. Foss. They had for some time been promised this treat by May, who sang duets with her new friend, though her voice was less well-trained than that of Kathleen.

"I shall say I had a headache, and dropped asleep," said Erica, shrugging her shoulders; "both statements will probably be true presently. If I don't get away from Chris and his inanities for a time, I shall go mad."

Erica did not care for music, and still less did she care for Kathleen Garry. It irritated her, as she said to her mother, to see Christopher listening entranced, with his mouth open, when any one sang or played to him. In reality, she was inclined to be jealous of the fascination exercised over both brother

and sister by that little brown-faced girl, with the merry smile and big, melancholy, dark eyes, though it was something akin to the charm Robin exercised over herself.

Kathleen and Robin had come to tea, and by a kind of tacit agreement May had led them immediately upstairs to her sitting-room, in the hope of escaping the company of Captain Sandry and Mr. Joseph Murch; but the latter was not to be foiled so easily, and, finding himself alone, in the banqueting-hall, whither came Christopher—in his vain quest of Erica—he cried aloud to his host that he was fonder of a little bit of music than of almost anything in this world, and pleaded in heart-rending accents to be allowed to join the party.

"It 's my sister's room. I 've nothing to do with it. She invites whom she likes," said Chris, walking off to avoid discussion, as his custom was; and he went upstairs and along the echoing pictureless gallery, shouting for Erica, and finally returned in a pet, ran up the little stair of the boudoir alone, entered and slammed the door behind him.

Joe Murch wandered disconsolately up and down the banqueting-hall. He hated to be left alone. He hated the interval between the after-luncheon coffee and liqueurs, and the moment when the arrival of tea made it decent and possible to ask for whiskey-and-soda. Also, he hated being snubbed by Christopher, though he endured this discomfort daily, rather than cut short his visit to his dear old pal.

"After you 're married, ol' man, I 've a notion my knife and fork won't be laid very often on your table," he now and then said pathetically to Christopher; who invariably replied, "Well, that will depend on Erica, of course. I shan't interfere. Invitations are

women's business, and she'll ask whom she likes to her own house."

Thinking unhappily of these and other discouraging responses to his frequent and affectionate appeals, Joe Murch hailed the sudden entry of Captain Sandry almost with gladness, though in his heart he feared and disliked him not a little.

"What, ain't you allowed inside the magic circle, either?" he said, with a melancholy attempt at jocosity.

"What do you mean?"

Captain Sandry's tones generally lost their smoothness in answering Mr. Murch, and became chiefly remarkable for a certain business-like brevity.

"Don't you hear?" asked Joe, jerking his head politely in the direction of the staircase, where, through the opening of a door, was heard for a moment the tinkle of a banjo, and a clear voice singing:

> "D'ye ken John Peel with his coat so gay?
> He lived at Troutbeck once on a day."

The door shut, and only the faintest sound remained audible.

"I know no one who can give the view halloo in old John Peel as I can," said Mr. Murch, almost weeping. "Scores of times I've been asked to do it in the chorus—scores of times. That little Kathleen Garry sings like a bird. I declare I'm mashed on the girl,—have been ever since the night she dined here first. Yet old Chris was quite short with me because I said I'd like to go up and listen. That's a nice way to treat an ol' pal on a visit!"

"Who's there?"

"All of 'em," said Joe—"she and Bob Garry. A fellow I can't stand. Puts on side. The Lord knows why. He was noted for it up at the 'Varsity. Noted. And Chris, and half the servants and everybody. Except me. I'm not good enough. That —— girl"—the word Mr. Murch used to describe Erica was not a pretty one—"has put it into his head I'm not fit company for his sister, I suppose. Chris has told me pretty plain that once he's married it's his wife is to have the inviting of his visitors. Ah, I can guess how many of his ol' pals he'll see then. I pity him. Tell you what it is, Sandry, she don't like you any better than she likes me."

"Does n't she?" said Captain Sandry.

"Take it from me," he advised, "once they're married you'll get the boot. I warn you as a friend."

"Where's Lady Clow?" asked Captain Sandry, ignoring his friend's warning.

"Asleep as usual. I saw her through the open door of her bedroom, asleep in the bow-window. She lives in the arm-chair by that window. I see her old cap there every time I come down the drive and glance up at the house. She can't get up the winding stair to the boudoir, so she said she'd leave her door open and listen to the music. That's the way she listens,—playing an accompaniment on her own nose. I suppose I may listen if I like to go and sit on the step outside the room with Bingo. But I won't do it. Fond as I am of music, I won't do it. If I'm not good enough to be allowed inside the room, I won't listen at all," said Joe Murch. "And if old Chris did n't mean I was n't good enough, I don't know what he did mean."

"What did he say?"

"Said it was his sister's room, and no business of

his if she asked me in or not. I 'm a sensitive man, Sandry. No one would believe, to look at me, what a sensitive man I am." His red eyes filled with weak tears.

"Look here," said Captain Sandry impatiently, "if that 's all Chris said, there 's nothing to be sensitive about. He 's quite right. It 's Miss Thorverton's private room; and of course he meant you were to go up and knock at the door and ask her if you might go in and listen, and naturally she 'll be only too delighted."

"Do you think so?" said Mr. Murch, brightening up. "D' ye think so, ol' man? Come with me, then."

"Not I. I don't pretend to care for music, and I 'm busy."

"I 'll take your advice. And mind, if I 'm not welcome I 'll come away. I 'll come straight away again, down here. Joe Murch can take a hint. He 's not the sort to push himself where he is n't wanted."

He went through the archway and up the broad oak staircase, and Captain Sandry stood looking after him for a moment.

Then he went to the foot of the stairs and heard the opening and the shutting of the sitting-room door, and the consequent rise and fall of the hunting chorus, which had apparently been encored:

> "Now he has gone, far—far away,
> We shall ne'er hear his voice in the morning."

He waited and listened, but Joe Murch did not return.

The loud ticking of the clock echoed through the empty hall; he arranged and sorted the account-books and papers he held, listening all the time attentively, as it seemed, for the possible approach of footsteps.

Then he walked quickly across the hall into Christopher's study.

Erica heard him, and held her breath. She supposed it was Christopher come to look for her, and smiled to herself, closing her eyes, however, in feigned slumber, lest he should take it into his head to look round the curtain. Then it suddenly occurred to her that it might be Robin, although there was no sound of a certain little whistle that was a signal between them. She peeped through the narrow opening between the edge of the curtain and the panelled wall, and beheld Captain Sandry.

He remained in the room but a very few moments. All his movements were quick and decided.

He laid down the bundle of accounts he had brought with him, on the table beside Christopher's writing-pad. Then he opened an unlocked drawer and took out a cheque-book.

Erica's attention became alert, because he made a slight, very slight, movement of the head as though he were listening: a scarcely perceptible, but still most suggestive movement.

He sat down before the writing-table almost immediately, and bent over the blotting-pad. Apparently he wrote a cheque; for she saw him tear one out, as he lifted his head. He blotted it, and folded it, and bestowed it in his pocket-book. Then he stood up and appeared to reflect, but only for an instant.

He turned over the pages of the cheque-book between those deft, slim hands, and tore out another cheque with a different movement, and quite extraordinary care.

This he also folded and put in his pocket. Then he returned the cheque-book to its place, shut the

drawer, and walked straight out of the room with his head erect, whistling.

She heard his footsteps crossing the hall, boldly, even noisily, and he whistled as he went upstairs.

Erica's heart beat fast. She was curiously conscious of as distinct a sensation of guilt as though she had herself committed a deed of dishonesty, instead of, as she shrewdly suspected, witnessing one.

After a moment's thought she walked across the room, in her turn, to the writing-table, and pulled open the unlocked drawer in which the owner of the cheque-book had left it, regardless of the printed appeal on its cover that it might be kept under lock and key.

The last counterfoil was undoubtedly freshly written, and bore the date of two days back, and the word, "Self, £10," in Christopher's schoolboy scrawl.

Erica was puzzled. The writing was fresh, and she was certain that Captain Sandry had forged the entry, but why should he commit forgery for the absurdly small sum of ten pounds?

She looked through the book for the counterfoil of the blank cheque which he had torn out so carefully, and could not find it. Presently she noticed a hiatus in the numbers, and saw that both cheque and counterfoil had been neatly removed.

Was he going to forge a cheque for a much larger amount at his leisure, and if so, why had he taken the trouble to forge one for ten pounds now?

She looked through the used counterfoils, and discovered at frequent intervals entries of five and ten pounds drawn to self, and remembered that Christopher sometimes cashed similar cheques on their way through Burstin, on motoring expeditions to points of interest in the neighbourhood, where they would

have luncheon or tea at a hotel before returning to Moreleigh.

He was boy enough to like to carry a plentiful supply of loose cash in his pockets, and liked besides to buy everything Erica fancied in the various towns which they visited. And Erica fancied a good many things.

But it seemed to her that, even so, his opportunities for the expenditure of ready money were not frequent enough to account for the frequency of the entries.

He played poker no more, and though he certainly betted with Captain Sandry and Joe Murch over billiards, she remembered that he generally had to ring for Cloberry when the moment came for paying up on these occasions, and that Cloberry brought him little heaps of gold and silver on a tray. But she was sufficiently acquainted with the ways of the household, by this time, to know that these sums were entered in Cloberry's book and debited against his master. She had heard Chris wonder how much money Cloberry kept in the house; since he never appeared to have the slightest difficulty in producing any sum required either by his master, or his master's visitors, at a moment's notice.

True, Christopher had gone to one or two shoots in the neighbourhood, she reflected, where the keepers would have expected heavy tips from the wealthy Mr. Thorverton of Moreleigh. No doubt many sovereigns, and even here and there a five-pound note, had gone thus; and he put gold into the plate in church on Sundays, but— Erica turned the short, stubby pages over with steady hands, and her cool, narrow brain worked busily as she counted up the entries and examined the handwriting.

When she put the cheque-book back into the drawer

she understood that Captain Sandry had played for safety, and made certain—as any one who knew Christopher's gross carelessness with regard to money matters would have made certain—that in thus confining himself to small sums he was almost secure from detection, since his employer would never trouble to consider the number of the small cheques he drew, and since he himself had evidently mastered the imitation of Christopher's schoolboy writing.

"I have heard him say that his methods were slow but sure," said Erica to herself. "It appears that my instincts of dislike for Captain Sandry were not given to me for nothing. Chris says I am prejudiced, but I suppose even he will admit now that my prejudices were well founded. Supposed to be a gentleman,—treated as poor Chris treated him, like a friend,—and all the while robbing him of such miserable sums. Ten pounds here and ten pounds there. It must have been for the sheer pleasure of the thing,—for the joy of taking advantage of the simplicity of a mere boy, and laughing at him in his sleeve."

Her indignation was quite genuine; she despised Captain Sandry from the bottom of her heart

She decided to act at once, walked across the room, rang the bell sharply, and returned to the writing-table. She felt as though she must mount guard over that cheque-book. What if Captain Sandry should return, and attempt to remove it? She would send for Christopher without delay.

The ubiquitous Cloberry was in the habit of answering the bell of his master's study himself, whenever he happened to hear it ring.

He was surprised to find Miss Clow seated before the writing-table, but he awaited her commands with

that air of respectfully subdued zeal which always characterised him in her presence.

"You rang, ma'am?"

"Yes," said Erica. She turned her head and spoke with that langour and distinctness that impressed him most. "Please go up to Miss May's sitting-room, Cloberry, and find Mr. Thorverton, and ask him quietly to come here to me at once. Quietly, you understand. Tell him I have something very important to say to him."

"Very good, ma'am," said Cloberry respectfully, and to himself, "What 's up? Is she going to throw him over? I should n't wonder. Them young Garrys is n't always hanging around here for nothing. The women think they 're after Miss May, but I know better. Well, I for one, should n't blame her. If I was her I 'd rather be Lady Erriff than Mrs. Chris Thorverton any day—money or no money."

"All right," said Christopher, rather sulkily, as Cloberry discreetly delivered his message.

He was vexed with Erica for not answering his calls; and he hated to be interrupted when he was interested in anything. But he did not dream of disobeying her summons.

She was standing on the hearthrug as he entered.

"Shut the door, Chris. I 've something to say," she said, with a kind of portentous enjoyment.

Erica, like many women, was so constituted that the anticipation of a scene afforded her a certain histrionic pleasure; Christopher, on the contrary, like most men, regarded the merest possibility of one with uneasiness and dismay. Moreover, experience had taught him that an interview beginning with the words, "I have something to say," invariably resulted in the discovery that the thing that had to be said was more or less an unpleasant thing to hear.

Wherefore, his countenance did not clear as Erica uttered her opening speech.

"What on earth 's the matter?" he said impatiently. "Why must I shut the door? The room 's like an oven. I never shut a door. I hate mysteries."

She looked at him, and perceived that he was in a bad temper, and changed her tactics immediately.

Her lip quivered.

Christopher melted at once.

Erica, in her superior and didactic moods, irritated him, although he loved her; but not for a moment was his tenderness proof against Erica in distress.

He had never learnt to shut a door quietly, but he now banged it obediently, came across the room, and put an arm round her waist, and took her hand; and Erica noticed, not for the first time, how plebeian and short and podgy the hand was that held her own white, well-shaped fingers, and she shuddered a little because she was as sensitive as she was observant.

"I say, old girl, I did n't mean to speak like that. The fact is, I was cross," he explained almost unnecessarily, "and so, like a brute, I spoke rudely to *you*. I 'm sorry. What is it?"

"I thought you 'd wish me to send for you if I were in trouble or difficulty," murmured Erica. She was playing a little out of her character, and she knew it, but perhaps she was really unnerved by the little scene which she had just witnessed; for though she seldom or never shed tears, she found to her surprise that tears were welling into her eyes.

Christopher, in an agony of remorse and self-reproach, wiped them away tenderly with his own large silk handkerchief.

"I 've just seen something so dreadful. I don't know how to tell you," she sobbed, "and yet I must tell you."

It was not at all the manner in which she had intended to announce her discovery, but, like a true artist, she rose to the occasion, and played upon the emotions of her audience.

"Of course you must tell me. I've a right to know anything that concerns you," said Christopher.

"It is you whom it concerns, and I know it will come upon you as a fearful shock. For you like him, which I never did."

Christopher moved uneasily. "Oh, come, I say! What is it?" he said. "If it's only me——"

Then she told him what she had seen.

He did not speak throughout the little recital, nor move to take the cheque-book into his hand, which she brought to him from the drawer of his writing-table; only looked at it, while she pointed out the numbers of the cheques on either side of the one that had been abstracted with its counterfoil, towards the end of the thick, half-used book, and the frequency of the entries, of cheques drawn to self, for ten pounds. Also she brought him his own blotting-pad, with its new impression of the freshly-written cheque, with the two-day-old date.

"If he's cheating you like this, you may be very sure he's cheating you in a hundred other ways, over the accounts and everything else," she said, having exhausted all the eloquence at her command in the denouncement of Captain Sandry. "I hope you'll now send for a chartered accountant, as I begged you to ages ago, Chris, and have the books gone into. He ought to go to prison. I knew he was a swindler; I felt it the first moment I looked at him."

Christopher said nothing. His face was very pale, and he walked away to the window as though he could not bear any more words, and stood there looking out,

Erica felt, as she had often felt before, an irritated consciousness that she did not yet altogether understand this boy, of whose stupidity she had spoken with contempt to her mother and to Robin Garry a hundred times.

He seemed to have neither anger for the robbery practised upon him, nor admiration for her cleverness in detecting it; and she had expected him to express both.

He did not even thank her for her zeal and care of his interests. He walked away from her, and stood alone, apart, staring out upon the park.

It was a still, grey afternoon after a morning's heavy rain.

The unusual prolongation of the summer had left the leaves still upon the trees and brushwood, to the despair of the sportsman, and the artist's joy.

The wide park, stretching into misty distance, afforded vistas of stately beeches,—now burning with red and orange,—and gigantic oaks, slowly yellowing. The tears of the weeping birch had become golden, and dropped from slender silver stems. But the great cedars near at hand, changeless through the seasons, cast their heavy gloom upon the ground they sheltered.

The dying bracken, on the distant slopes, made patches of russet brown on the emerald of the turf. Beneath the window of the study lay a sodden, crimson, and purple and scarlet carpet of the leaves of the Virginia creeper, dropped from the walls of the Abbey, and turning brown in death.

"What are you going to do about it, Christopher?" said Erica.

It was not until the question was repeated a second time that he turned his head. And then, as chance would have it, Captain Sandry walked into the room.

They heard his steps in the outer hall, brisk and confident, and coming along the uncarpeted passage to the door of the study; and they looked at each other in consternation.

Erica, standing in the middle of the room, with the open cheque-book in her hand, and Christopher, with his hands in his pockets, in the space before the window, between the heavy velvet curtains that hung straight down on either side of the bow.

Captain Sandry's voice sounded before he entered, cheerful and confident as his footsteps had been.

"Christie, old chap, are you there? Tea's ready. They've all come down from the sitting-room, and said you'd come off here by yourself. And they want to know if they may set the gramophone going."

He stopped short. The expression on both the faces before him arrested his attention, almost compelled it. Christopher's air of lowering embarrassment, and the dawning triumph of Erica's regard as she lifted her eyes from the open cheque-book, and immediately lowered them again, brought the colour to his sallow face.

For a moment he stood there motionless, and then Christopher—the inarticulate, the slow-witted, whiskey-sodden boy—found words.

"All right, Erica," he said. "You go to tea, and tell them I'm coming presently. And, I say, put down that cheque-book, will you?"

Erica did not want to go, and still less did she wish to put down the cheque-book, which she regarded, jealously, as part of her hold over Captain Sandry. But somehow she found herself reluctantly leaving the room without it; and Captain Sandry sprang forward, mechanically, to open the door for her with his accustomed deferential politeness. She saw that

his face was white, and heard his hurried breathing, but she saw and heard no more, for the door was closed behind her.

Christopher did not waste breath, and he did not take his hands out of his pockets.

He nodded towards the cheque-book on the table.

"She was sitting here, in the window, hidden by this curtain, and saw you forge my name, and tear a blank cheque out of my book," he said simply.

Captain Sandry tried twice to speak, and failed.

He was so taken aback by the unexpectedness and the suddenness of this happening that he could not think. His glibness deserted him.

The silence lasted for quite a long time. Christopher apparently waited for his defence.

Captain Sandry heard himself muttering weakly, "It 's her word against mine."

"There 's the book," said Chris, as simply as before, and again nodded his head towards the open cheque-book, which lay on the writing-table within reach of the agent's hand. Then he turned round again, and stared out of the window.

"I expect you 'd better—go," he said, very slowly, and revolved upon his heel, fidgeting from one foot to the other as his custom was.

"Go?" said Captain Sandry.

"I expect you 'd better go," said Christopher.

He faced the agent squarely. He looked such a boy, in spite of his square jaw and heavy chin, and Captain Sandry knew him to be so pitifully ignorant of business that he told himself he would have it out with the youngster, convince him that it was all a mistake, even laugh him out of his suspicions; but Christopher's next words caused this resolve to die away.

"As I don't know much about—this sort of thing—I dare say I ought to—to wire for Gethell to come down, and look into it for me, and advise me what to do," said Christopher. "I expect he'd say I was wrong to try and settle a—a serious thing like this, on my own. But I can't help it. You've—you've played cricket with me, and—and so on, and I'd rather give you a chance, if you care to take it."

Again the agent tried to speak, and again he found no words.

"I expect you'll want to catch the six express. That's the only decent afternoon train," said Christopher. "I'll order the car while you put your things together, if you like. And anything you want can be forwarded after you if you'll leave an address with Cloberry. And I expect," he added slowly, "you'd better give me back that blank cheque you took."

"I've got it here," said Captain Sandry, wretchedly.

He took it out of his pocket-book, and laid it beside the cheque-book on the table.

"That's all right," said Christopher. "I expect that's all. Nobody will know anything about this so far as I'm concerned."

"There's Miss Clow," stammered Captain Sandry. "She's my enemy—she's been trying all along to——"

"I'd rather not talk about her, if you don't mind," said Christopher. "Of course, I can't answer for anything she chooses to say. She's a right to say what she likes. But I'll ask her not to say anything—and I don't think she will if I ask her not."

Captain Sandry lingered, stammering forth a few abject words of appeal.

"There's—there's more excuse for me than you know, Christie. I—I haven't a penny in the world

beyond what you—you pay me. I—I was brought up expensively," he pleaded. "I 've got people dependent on me. And your infernal carelessness was a temptation. You, who 've always had all you wanted, don't know what a temptation it was——"

Christopher looked at him, and for a moment his boyish face grew stern and Captain Sandry was startled, for it was almost as though old Thorverton stood before him once more, with his square jaw set in anger.

"I dare say," said Chris, "but you must remember that I should n't have been—quite so careless—if I had n't known that my father trusted you."

CHAPTER XX

MAY was more nearly happy in the days that succeeded the sudden departure of Captain Sandry than she had been at any time since her arrival at the Abbey.

She did not attempt to define the exact state of her feelings towards Anthony, nor of his towards her; but the consciousness that she understood him better than any other living being understood him was in the background of her mind continually, and with it a sense of tenderness and triumph, and peace indescribable.

She had long known that she could talk to Anthony of her own thoughts and feelings as she could talk to no one else, for he was the most sympathetic listener it was possible to imagine; but she had never dreamed that he would confide in her.

It was as though, in the material darkness which had surrounded them during their walk from the coverts, Anthony had been able to make visible to her the light of his soul.

She had worshipped a statue, and the statue had proved to be a living man; and already the reality was a thousand times dearer than the dream had ever been.

Here was the real Anthony, with weaknesses, perhaps, that the ideal Anthony had never possessed; but one brave, warm little human heart was not likely to love him the less for them. Lady Denys had been

quick to perceive the tender, protecting, motherly instinct that was so strong an element in May's character, but she would have been astonished to learn that it was her grave, wise, silent son who was to call it forth; and yet more astonished had she known that to this maiden, twenty years younger than Anthony Denys, it was given to understand him as the mother that bore him had never understood him.

It was agreed that May would go to the Manor House immediately after her brother's wedding, which was to take place in the first week of December. The bride-elect and her mother were to remain at the Abbey until the last days of November, which, as Lady Clow pointed out, would leave less than a fortnight for the provision of Erica's trousseau.

"I shall have nothing to do but shop when we get to Paris," said Erica, indifferently, "and I am getting everything I want for the present by post. Christopher's temper is bad enough down here. If I took him away from his cub-hunting and his shooting it would become unbearable."

"Why take him away?"

Erica did not concern herself to reply.

"Perhaps she is afraid of his falling out of love with her, and in love with Miss Garry," thought Lady Clow. "But if so, why not marry him at once as he wishes, and make sure of him. The ways of Erica are beyond my understanding."

Kathleen Garry and one or other of her brothers were constantly at the Abbey, and May and Christopher and Erica, chaperoned by Lady Clow, had dined quietly at Kellacombe on more than one occasion. May could not help being greatly attracted by Kathleen; by the infectious gaiety of her laugh, her elfin

charm, her honesty, and the warm friendship the girl professed for herself.

"If Christopher could have met her before he met Erica, and fallen in love with her, how charming that would have been, and what a dear little sister I should have had. Between Erica and me there will never be any real confidence, I do not trust her. I cannot feel her to be sincere, though she is so fond of proclaiming uncomfortable truths at the wrong moment. And I am sure Christopher is not really happy, though he is so much in love. He would be happier with little Kathleen," thought May.

Lady Erriff had hinted the same thing to her more than once, but loyalty to her brother had forbidden May even to seem to understand, far less to agree with her.

Nevertheless, she perceived that Christopher and Kathleen had many tastes in common. They were out cub-hunting at daybreak, while Erica, who had a horror of early rising, slumbered peacefully in her state bedroom; they shared a great love of sport and outdoor games, a dislike of responsibility and of anything resembling study.

They both cared almost as much for animals as they did for their fellow-creatures; whereas Erica was afraid of cows, shuddered at cats, and hated dogs.

"If people married for companionship, there is no doubt that Christopher and Kathleen would be companions. And after all, when people have to live together, such things must count for a great deal," thought wise little May.

It was true, as Erica had complained, that Christopher listened, with his mouth open and his eyes shining with admiration, when Kathleen sang; but then he loved music, and Erica did not. Also, having

no accomplishments himself, he sincerely, if without much discrimination, admired those who possessed them, and unwittingly annoyed Erica by suggesting that she should learn to sing duets with Kathleen, as May did.

Erica would have put a stop to Kathleen's singing, and her frank *camaraderie* with Christopher, and indeed her visits to the Abbey altogether, but that these afforded the best excuse possible for the frequent appearance of one or other of the young lady's brothers, who seized every possible chance of accompanying her.

"Poor Tom can't get off duty and run down for week-ends, like Robin," said Kathleen, "but what with travelling by the night-train, and one thing and another, we *do* see more of them than we used to, especially Robin. I hope he is n't neglecting his work. It seems such a long way to come for such flying visits."

Whether or no Robin were neglecting his work, his attraction for Erica increased daily, as she became more and more aware of the precariousness of her hold upon him.

He was certainly as much in love with her as his nature permitted, and his nature was peculiarly ardent; but it was also unusually susceptible, and that in the intervals of making love to her he would be willing to make love to others she did not doubt, and her vanity was hurt by the knowledge. And since vanity was almost Erica's strongest attribute, she suffered, and would have made Robin suffer in turn, if she could; but his light-heartedness rendered him invulnerable.

It was Christopher who paid.

With the strange perversity of man, he loved Erica the more because she made him suffer; but to May it

appeared incredible that her caprices and her selfishness would not, in the end, destroy his affection altogether.

Lady Clow trembled when she saw the boy goaded by the cold satire, under which she had herself so often writhed, into displaying a temper but too easily moved; and marvelled at the ease with which a look or smile brought him back to his bearings.

"He will get tired of it, I know he will. This is only November, and the marriage is not to be till December. How can they go on like this for another month?" she thought, terrified.

Captain Sandry was no longer at hand to provoke Erica, and it seemed as though she must have a victim.

"She 's got rid of poor old Sandry. It will be my turn next," said Joe Murch to Kathleen, in whom he was now driven to confide. He had gradually brought himself to believe that Captain Sandry had been one of his best friends. "No one knows why he went, or what it was. But I know it was Miss Clow who persuaded Christie to give him the boot. She can't bear Christie's ol' pals; and, mark my words, I shall be the next."

Kathleen thought it very likely; but she could not pretend to regret Captain Sandry, though she was too good-natured to say so.

"I offered to take his place," said Joe gravely, "as soon as I knew for certain he was n't coming back. I knew poor old Chris was in a fix, and I 'm not the man to leave an old friend in a fix and not hold out a helpin' hand. 'Ol' man,' I said, 'I 'll take on the billet. I doe' know the work,' I said, 'but I can learn it.' All the people round here know me. They like me better 'an they liked poor ol' Sandry, who, between

you and me, Miss Garry, was a queer fish, tho' I don't want to hit a man when he's down."

"And what did Mr. Thorverton answer?"

Joe shook his head dismally.

"Said he'd written to old Gethell to find him somebody. Very short with me. Not a bit grateful. You know his way. But he doe' mean it. He knows I'm the best friend he's got in the world. Between you and me, Miss Garry, that's why Miss Clow don't like me. Jealous. If I was Chris, I would n't stand it. She treats him like a dog. Worse. I would n't treat Bingo as she treats him—a fellow that could marry anybody."

Kathleen only laughed.

"I suppose he likes it," she said.

But Christopher did not like it. He was not happy, and though he was too much in love to be able to break the bonds that held him, he became daily more impatient and irritable.

He was often miserable in Erica's company, and always restless out of it. He did not wait for Joe Murch's persuasions now to drown his cares in whiskey-and-soda, though he was uneasily conscious that the habit of doing so was growing upon him.

"I'll turn over a new leaf when I'm married," he told himself. "Erica will settle down then, as she says, and everything will be different. I wish to Heaven December was here, and the wedding over and done with."

Erica had tried to persuade Mr. Denys to invite her to share May's riding lessons, but, in the quiet and steadfast fashion peculiar to him, he had evaded the request.

"It's cruelty to animals to putt her o' norseback."

said Christopher's old groom to Cloberry. "Wadder she weigh? Thirteen stun I give her, not a ounce less, and she du bump something crule."

"If she wants to ride she'll ride with the best of 'em," said Cloberry. "But I don't see what she wants to ride for. I never cared for horses myself, and what's the sense of them now motors 'as been invented?"

Erica perceived quickly that she would not shine in the accomplishment she had proposed to acquire, and, after the second trial, abandoned the attempt, and Lady Clow fell weeping upon her daughter's neck and thanked her; believing that, had she persevered, she would surely have been killed.

"I may be old-fashioned," she said tearfully to Christopher, "but I think women are out of place in the hunting-field. And I know her dear father would have thought so too, though he was not a hunting-man."

"She need not have hunted," said Christopher.

"Would Erica have been content to let you go out alone, once she had learnt to ride?" said Lady Clow, reproachfully. "Surely it is much nicer, dear Christopher, when you come in tired, and wet, and splashed with mud beyond belief, as you do after that dreadful cub-hunting, to find her looking fresh, and pretty, and beautifully dressed, waiting to welcome you."

"I dare say," said Christopher, rather crossly.

Yet perhaps the moment of his greatest pride and joy in his betrothed wife was the moment of Erica's appearance at the meet at Kellacombe.

She was dressed in white cloth, with magnificent Russian sables, which he had but just sent for from London, at her request.

Against the rich dark fur, the brilliant colouring of her lovely, unveiled face, and the glory of her hair shone forth, illumined by the faint sunshine of a still November day.

She sat erect, beautiful, self-possessed; a conspicuous figure in Christopher's perfectly-appointed car, with chauffeur and attendant footman both dressed in deepest mourning.

Every eye was regarding her, and a great many tongues were busily engaged in talking about her.

She was alone, because she had ordered her mother to stay at home; and because May, following the advice of old Lady Denys and the promptings of her own feelings, had decided not to appear at the meet.

"Rather soon for young Thorverton to put in a show, is n't it? His father has n't been dead six months," said a discontented sportsman, mounted on a weedy, knocked-kneed horse, and regarding, with a surly and jealous stare, the luxurious car, its beautiful occupant, and the powerful bay hunter on which Christopher was mounted.

"Rot!" said his neighbour, tersely.

"People are much more lenient than they used to be," said the neighbour's wife, leaning over the side of a spattered dog-cart, and speaking confidentially, to soften the effect of her husband's abruptness. "Life is so short, and, after all," vaguely, "it 's so much more sensible, is n't it?"

"What 's more sensible?"

"The modern way of taking things. Not making such a fuss about mourning, for instance. Which of us, if we were asked, would wish our friends to do it?"

"Is that girl the daughter of the pretty Mrs. Thorverton? She 's not a bit like her mother."

"Of course not. She 'd be in mourning. She has n't come. This is young Thorverton's *fiancée*."

"Much too good for him," said the discontented sportsman, who was angry with Christopher for being young, and idle, and rich, while he was himself old, and idle, and poor. "Marrying him for his money, of course!"

Christopher sat square and motionless upon his horse, at some little distance from the car, and he only responded with a surly nod to any salutations he received. His ungraciousness contrasted markedly with the ready pleasantness of the sons of the house, who rode hither and thither slowly, with bright faces and cheery greetings, hailed by one and another.

Lord Erriff's grey was seen approaching, and way was made for him; he rode straight to Christopher's side.

"That was uncommonly kind of you, to want to mount my little girl," he said heartily, "but her mother thinks she 'd better learn to content herself with the old screw she 's on now."

Chris turned red, and mumbled something about horses eating their heads off.

"That 's all very well, but we must n't spoil her, you know, letting her ride other people's horses. No, no. And what would Miss Clow say, eh? I must pay my respects."

He paid his respects at such length that Lady Erriff, watching him from the steps of the house, was annoyed.

"I wish Tom would not make that girl more conspicuous by paying her attention before every one like this. It will turn her head. And I 've told him I doubt very much whether she is a really nice girl," she thought impatiently; oblivious of the fact that

it was not because she was nice, but because she was beautiful, that Lord Erriff desired to talk to Miss Clow.

"Do you think it is stupid of me not to want to hunt?" asked Erica, lifting her lovely chin, and looking straight into the kind, merry little brown face, with its wrinkled brow, and soft eyes that were bent so admiringly upon her. "Chris wants me to ride; but I am so nervous, and I'm such a weight! Do you think it matters if I don't?"

She parted her red lips, in that half smile which showed just a glint of white, even teeth, and deepened the dimples of her cheeks, and narrowed the long-lashed eyes.

"Of course it does n't matter at all. Why should it? We've plenty of pretty girls on horseback here, but only one goddess in the car," said Lord Erriff, gallantly.

Not content with paying Erica compliments, he good-naturedly introduced several of the most important people to her, so that she held a little court, and, by the time a move was made, she was flushed and radiant with satisfaction and gratified vanity.

Also the novelty of the scene amused and interested her, so that she watched with pleasure the brightly-coloured moving picture, and was sorry when the procession of hounds and huntsmen and whips at length started, followed by the crowd. Tom Garry made no attempt to approach the car; but Robin only waited until his father touched his hat and rode away from Erica's side to take his place. He bent over her, said a few words in her ear, and cantered on; but Christopher waited until the crowd had gone by, the car remaining stationary.

"I say," he said, "you made a regular sensation."

"Did I?" said Erica, well pleased.

She leaned back among her sables, and looked up at him, smiling and lovely.

She possessed sufficient common-sense to realise, in spite of her vanity, that her success had been due not only to her beauty, but to her position as the betrothed wife of the largest subscriber to hounds in the county, and the owner of Moreleigh. So that she was at the moment less inclined than usual to underrate Christopher.

Also he looked his best on horseback, and she gratified him by telling him so.

"You know they're going to draw Burstin woods, Tim," he said to the footman. "Had n't you better go round by the common?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, I'm not going to try and follow them," said Erica. "I'm going home. I only wanted to see the meet."

He looked disappointed, but she leaned forward coaxingly.

"It's been so delightful, and I've enjoyed it so much. I'd no idea you'd look so nice in pink, Chris," she said softly. "I shall always want to come and see you start off, when we're married. But I don't want to go hustling through the lanes, with a lot of other people on wheels, taking the paint off the car. I shall go straight home and see that there are eggs and sardines for tea, just as you like; and after tea we'll get away from the others and go and sit in your study together."

"Right you are, old girl," said Christopher. His face cleared, and he went off, nodding to her, and saying to himself, "By Jove, does n't she pay for dress! It has n't taken her any time at all to learn the ropes. I'm jolly glad I sent for those sables, though I'd no

idea fur was such an expensive thing to buy. But I don't care what they cost. She looks like an empress, by Jove."

"I wish he would n't call me old girl," thought Erica, as the car, hooting merrily, started off in the opposite direction to that which the hunt had taken, and carried her over trampled mud and sodden grass, to the high road which led to Moreleigh.

CHAPTER XXI

ERICA was resting in a deep arm-chair before the log-fire in the banqueting-hall, examining idly the advertisements in the picture-papers, which lay on a little table close to her hand.

She was bored because she was alone, though she would have been even more bored if her mother had remained downstairs to keep her company.

But Lady Clow, finding it next to impossible to keep awake during the after-luncheon hour, had floated quietly off to her room, there to meditate in her favourite easy-chair by the window, without fear of interruption from Erica, who was apt to wake her from the most refreshing slumber in order to inform her, with distressing bluntness, that she was snoring too loud or that her cap was falling off.

The weather afforded Miss Clow an excellent excuse for not going out, though May, in a little black suit of rough serge, and a waterproof hood, set forth without hesitation to face a light, driving rain that was scarcely more than mist, to pay her daily visit to old Lady Denys, and at her heels sedately paced Christopher's great Newfoundland as her escort.

Erica marked with a pencil one or two illustrations which caught her fancy, determining to order this or that dress and coat, or to try, quite unnecessarily, some much-vaunted specific for hair or complexion, or another requisite for her already laden toilet-table.

But she had ordered and purchased so many things

recently, and Christopher had lavished so many gifts upon her, that she experienced a feeling rather of satiety than of interest, as she glanced languidly over the listed wares of the *costumier* and *perruquier* and jeweller.

"It is really only amusing to wish for things when one knows one can't get them," she murmured, and rose from her chair, dropping the papers on to the hearthrug, and lifting her arms above her head to yawn at her leisure.

She had changed her outdoor suit of white cloth for one of the æsthetic indoor gowns her soul loved; and wore a picture-frock of clinging brown chiffon, with a pretence of cloth at the hem, and a jewelled belt and collar.

She looked at herself in an old French mirror, long and narrow, which was suspended on a panel between the windows opposite her, and decided that she must look like a mediæval princess, in the meek, dull russet of her gown, with her splendid, ruddy hair, milk-white skin, and the flashing of innumerable mock gems at throat and waist.

"I suppose I ought to have gone out." She regarded the statuesque figure in the glass critically. "I believe my shoulders are broader, and even if one is built on an heroic scale, one cannot afford to get broad. I drive too much and walk too little. I have not walked a yard to-day. Well, I can't be bothered to change again, and this nasty wet mist takes all the wave out of one's hair, and it won't clear up now."

She moved slowly through the archway, and walked to the front door, opened it, and looked out.

The sky was heavily overcast that had been so clear in the morning; the distance was shrouded in mist;

the smell of the wet earth and sodden leaves rose fragrantly to her nostrils.

"How damp, and horrid, and mournful it looks. After all, I hate the country," said Erica, and shuddered in her thin gown, which was never made for the open air on a chill autumn day.

She was about to close the door when she caught sight of the distant figure of a horseman, emerging from the mist at the farther end of the avenue: scarlet and white and brown became visible.

"Christopher coming home early," thought Erica. "Well, I 'm rather glad. Lucky my being at the door to welcome him."

But as the rider approached more closely she was able to perceive that he was not Christopher; she looked and waited a moment longer, and decided he must be one of the Garrys, but in general aspect they were so much alike that she could not tell which.

"But I am not going to be found standing on the doorstep to welcome either of them," she thought, with a smile, and her face lost its bored and fatigued expression, and her cold eyes shone with interest and excitement. She closed the doof softly and returned to the fireside.

Cloberry's voice addressing her from the archway made her start.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," he said deferentially, "one of the Mr. Garrys is riding up the avenue. I 'appened to be looking out of the study window. Miss Thorverton 's out, 'm. Will you or her ladyship be at home?"

"Her ladyship is resting—but I shall be only too glad to see anybody," said Erica. "Are they coming back from the hunt then?"

"No, ma'am. Mr. Thorverton's groom is back, 'm.

He says they started a fox near Longmead, and had a hard run back this way and killed in the open close to Moreleigh; and Mr. Thorverton took his second horse and went on back to Burstin coverts, which they was to have drawn to start with." He lingered, wondering a little at the lack of interest Erica displayed, and the bell clanged suddenly through the hall.

Cloberry stepped quickly back to open the door, and she heard Tom's voice asking, not for May, but for her, with almost aggressive distinctness.

"Yes, sir, Miss Clow is in the banqueting-hall, sir."

"That's right, I'll come in for a moment. Send some one to take my horse round, will you?"

Cloberry gave orders to one of the footmen, who had by this time hurried into the outer hall.

"Beg pardon, sir, nothing happened, sir, I hope?" said Cloberry, very softly, but Erica caught the words and her heart gave a sudden leap. She was, in fact, so startled that she lost Tom's reply.

Her brain worked quickly, and in a flash she realised that accidents in the hunting-field were common enough, and that something might easily have happened to Christopher, and Tom be hurrying here to break to her the news that her magnificent castle in Spain had tumbled about her ears.

It was characteristic of her that she thought of a possible accident to Christopher only in so far as it related to or affected herself and her fortunes. Then Tom's answer, heard sub-consciously, reached her understanding.

"Oh, Lord, no, what should have happened?"

"Oh, nothing, sir, nothing, I hope, only one never knows," Cloberry hastened to say apologetically.

"It's only that I've got to go back to London to-day," Tom explained, with rather unnecessary ela-

boration, but Cloberry was a privileged person and a proven friend, "and we killed close by here."

"Yes, sir, so I hear, sir," said Cloberry.

Erica was at once relieved of her fears, and dismayed by the shock that the mere thought of a catastrophe had caused her.

"If I should suffer like that if it fell through," she reflected with beating heart, "why do I put it off? Why do I run any risk by unnecessary delay?" And for the second time that day she realised how different would be the position and lot in life of Mrs. Christopher Thorverton from that of Miss Erica Clow.

"I won't risk it for anybody. I have been a fool," Erica thought; and since thoughts may be both multifarious and instantaneous, she had time for these and other reflections between the opening of the hall door and the appearance of Tom Garry, in his scarlet coat, white breeches, and splashed riding-boots, beneath the archway of the banqueting-hall.

"Will you forgive my running in to see you like this? I 've got to go back to London to-day unexpectedly," he said, for the benefit of Cloberry, "and as we were so close to the Abbey, I asked Thorverton's leave to come and say good-bye to you—and Miss Thorverton," he added hurriedly, "as I may not be back in these parts for some time."

The swing of a distant, self-shutting, baize-covered door, with a noisy and powerful spring, announced Cloberry's final disappearance into the servants' quarters.

"You terrified me," said Erica. She was still pale, and not a little angry, as people are apt to be when they have been badly frightened. "I thought something had happened to Christopher."

"Would you have cared so much if it had?" Tom asked, bitterly.

He dropped on one knee beside the low chair in which she lay, leaning back among the cushions.

He, too, was pale—his pallor showing through his brown skin; he was also a little breathless from the haste he had made, and from the emotion that beset him at the sight of her, so exquisitely fair, in the brown draperies that clung closely to her beautiful form, at once revealing and veiling every line and curve.

"Of course I should have cared. You try to make me out very heartless."

"I have come to think you are very heartless. It took me a long while to find it out."

"You have not known me a long while."

"Did you get my letter?"

"Yes."

"You did not answer it."

He rose, and put his hands behind his back, and stood looking down upon her with a kind of boyish haughtiness, trying to hide his pain and anger; and she looked at him approvingly. He was certainly as good-looking as any of the dead and gone Garrys whose pictures hung upon the walls of Kellacombe, with his slight, straight figure, delicate features, and handsome brown eyes. He was not so attractive as Robin,—he lacked his brother's charm, and also his *gaieté de cœur*,—but on the other hand he was in deadly earnest, and of Robin, Erica had never been very sure.

"You have not given me time. It was a long letter. It took me ages to wade through it."

"You did wade through it, however?"

"I read it," she said indifferently.

"I suppose I must be grateful for that," said Tom.

He laughed without mirth, looking at her, and remembering with what love and longing, and at what infinite cost of pains and labour he had written and re-written that letter. He had thought of it for days, and sat up all night weighing the words of it, and trying to make them say all he wanted to say, in language that should be worthy of her who read.

"Of course you only laughed at it," he said.

He was so white that Erica relented. She reflected, besides, that if Christopher came home early and found Tom in this mood there might be a scene, with unpleasant results to herself.

"I did n't laugh at it," she said soothingly. "As far as the letter went, there was nothing to be said. Only that you ought n't to have written it."

She paused and added with a little laugh:

"It was the right letter from the wrong man."

"Would you rather it had been from Robin?" said Tom bitterly.

"Don't be silly."

She reflected with some amusement that when she had read the letter she had wished Robin rather than his brother had written it. But Robin seldom put pen to paper, and when he did, took care to write nothing that could compromise himself or anybody else; whereas Tom had poured forth his soul in the eight closely-written sheets which were now laid away, poor blotted trophies, in Erica's new dressing-case.

"Besides, you took a great deal for granted in that letter."

"I took nothing for granted. You have told me over and over again, almost in so many words, that you love me."

"Hush!" she said uneasily.

"I am speaking almost in a whisper, and if I were not—there is no one to hear me."

"You never know in this horrible, great, echoing place with doors all round."

"The doors are shut, and I have my eye on the archway. I could see any one coming across the hall."

"I hate the archway, with those curtains. People may stand behind curtains and hear all sorts of things," said Erica, and she smiled a little, thinking of Christopher's study, and of Captain Sandry's discomfiture at her hands.

"You would not hate it if you had nothing to hide."

"I have nothing to hide," she said angrily. "I am engaged to Christopher, and you know it, and yet you come here and make love to me. It is you who should be afraid, not I."

"You have told me in so many words," he said slowly, "over and over again, that you regret your engagement. You told me so the last time we met, when you all came over and dined at Kellacombe. I remember your very words that night."

"Then please don't quote them. If there is one thing I hate more than another, it is being quoted against myself," she said, pouting.

"It must be very inconvenient," he said, with a touch of scorn, but in a voice so low that her fears were quelled, "when one is as changeable as the wind, as changeable as you are. But as I told you in my letter, I will no longer be blown hither and thither by every breath of yours. At Kellacombe—the last time you spoke to me—Erica, do you remember?" the brown eyes grew soft, and the young man came over to her once more, and knelt beside her chair, but placed himself so that he could still command a view of the archway as well as of her face, "you let me

take you away from the others and their senseless games for a few brief moments, to show you the sporting prints in the music-room—as though you cared anything about sporting prints!" he cried, with a tender, unsteady laugh. "But you played up, and came with me, though Thorverton showed he did n't like it. And you said you preferred the brightness and lightness of our ugly modern house to the dark panels and gloom of this beautiful old Abbey, which gave you the creeps; and though, of course, I did n't believe you, I loved you for saying it, because I knew you said it to please me; and I asked you if you liked me better than the owner of the Abbey, and you answered—oh, my darling, my sweetheart, you can't pretend to forget—" his lips were now so close to her ear that she need have no fear of eavesdroppers, and she could not deny that his love-making was very tender and impassioned, holding nothing of the mockery of Robin, nor of the clumsiness of Christopher; and that in his scarlet coat and white stock he looked as gallant and lusty a young lover and true sportsman as ever bent his knee to a woman.

"You made me say more than I meant. I was frightened," she murmured. "I knew that Christopher was jealous. I wanted to get away."

"That is not true." His tone changed, and he sprang to his feet. "And that is not the first time you have told me what is not true."

"If there is one thing I pride myself on it is speaking truth in and——"

"Then you are a self-deceiver," he interrupted. His outraged sense of rectitude, and the sternness of youth, seemed momentarily to overpower his love; and he spoke as a judge addressing a culprit, and heedless

of her indignation. "I have found you out, Erica, and more than once."

She looked rather alarmed.

"I believe my love for you has helped me to find you out," he went on, more quietly, "though they say that Love is blind. In poor Thorverton's case it is blind enough, but you cannot fool me as you do him. It took me a little time. You see, I was not suspecting treachery. And then, suddenly, I understood, and I saw how you were playing with us all round, unwilling to let me go, and yet not honest enough to break your engagement with that poor, trusting, thick-headed lout; flirting with Robin——"

"That is nothing," she said hastily.

"Pardon me, I know Robin. He does not make every excuse to get away from London, and to get over here, for the sheer pleasure of night-travelling. when he happens to be working like a nigger."

"Why should it not be May Thorverton whom Robin comes to see?" said Erica.

"God knows why. It would probably be happier for them both if it were," he said. "She is a good little thing."

"He pays her a good deal of attention."

"That would not prevent Robin from flirting with you. You seem to have a poor opinion of my intelligence."

"I suppose I have a poor opinion of most people's intelligence," said Erica, in a tone of re-awakened interest. She liked to discuss herself, and she was, besides, willing to lead the conversation into a safer direction. "I bested mamma, probably not for the first time, when I was two years old. She will tell you all about it, in detail, and at great length, if you encourage her."

"Because your mother is not—not so clever as you are——"

Erica laughed derisively.

"What a polite way of putting it."

"When I talk of your mother I have every intention of being polite," he said with spirit. "Frankly, I dislike intensely the manner in which you speak to her and of her; and even if you have no natural affection for her——"

"There you are wrong," said Erica. Her light eyes were glittering with anger beneath their heavy fringes; but she spoke calmly, and Tom's outburst of fault-finding made him more interesting in her eyes, even while it angered her. She was, besides, so constituted that she preferred blame to indifference, and was never tired of discussion when it concerned her own personality.

"I am sorry to disappoint you," she said, laughing to show him how little sorry she was, "but I am not so heartless as you choose to suppose. Strange as it may seem to you, and even as it seems to myself, I am, in my own odd way, fond of mamma!"

"Why should it be strange, since you are her child? And since it is only too clear that she worships the ground you tread upon?"

"It is strange because she is not a particularly attractive person," said Erica calmly. "I get bored with having her about sometimes, of course. Any one would; and listening to her conversation is a cross between reading one's washing-book and studying one's catechism. But I have often thought that, if she died, I should miss the old thing."

The words were flippant, but nevertheless they rang more true in Tom's ears than any words that Erica had yet spoken that afternoon.

"I have known all along," he said slowly, "that you are not really heartless, Erica. A great deal of it is pose, like so much of—of what one regrets in you. I suppose if I thought you were really that which you try to make yourself out to be, even I—though I might not be able to help loving you—should not want to marry you. And I do want to marry you. You've told me enough of your life before you came here to show me you haven't had a chance. You've been brought up, as you say, to believe it to be your duty to sell yourself to the highest bidder," said honest Tom, altogether unaware of the amazement with which Lady Clow would have heard this statement. "Well, I want to take you away from it all. You, with the beauty one sees once in a generation, and the wit, and the cleverness one would appreciate so keenly if only—if only—it went with—other things. Oh, my darling, it's in you to be so different. With that face, you were never meant to lie and plot and scheme and do ugly things. You were meant to be true and sweet and honest. I can't help it if you call me a prig and a fool for talking like this. I want to save you—somehow—from yourself," he said passionately.

"You are talking like a Nonconformist minister," she remarked. "Not that I have ever known a Nonconformist minister."

"I have," said Tom, breathing hard, for he was angry at the interruption, and at the shrug of the shoulders which accompanied it. "He was one of the best fellows I ever met."

She laughed.

"You are very unlike all my preconceived notions of a fashionable young Guardsman."

Tom turned away abruptly, and stared into the heart of the wood fire. His eyes were blind with

tears, and he did not want Erica to see them, nor could he bear to listen any more to her mockery. He struggled with himself, and with the strength of his own feelings.

A white hand was laid softly on his shoulder.

"I am a beast," Erica whispered.

She had risen from her chair, and was standing close to him,—so close that the halo of her hair brushed his shoulder,—and he turned and looked into her eyes.

"I 'm fighting to keep you off," she said recklessly, "because there 's something in what you say that appeals to—to the best part of me. I don't know how it is."

His resentment was forgotten instantly. He took her into his arms.

"Then marry me, sweetheart. Do the straight thing. Face poor Thorverton this evening, when he comes in, and tell him you don't love him and can't marry him. I 'll stand by you if you 're afraid. I 'll tell him for you, if you like. But I expect, poor chap, he 'd rather hear it from you. And then—oh, Erica —give me your hand—and we 'll face the music. What does anything matter so long as we 're together? And it 's not, after all, absolute starvation that I 'm offering you," he said, pressing her closely to him. "I 'm a man, not a boy. I can work. I 'll chuck soldiering and find a job that pays. I 've as many brains as my forefathers, I dare say, and they were self-made men. I 'm no stupider than Robin, and he 's making money. You 'll be happier poor, my darling, with the man you love, than rich with the man you don't."

As he spoke, Erica conjured up the mental vision of herself, and knew that she would make a beautiful picture; shame-faced, drooping, faltering her avowal

to Christopher, and then lifting up her head—freed from the weight of deceit; light-hearted, proud, honest, giving her hand to this lover and champion who believed in her, and stepping out into the wide world with him to face poverty; not the grinding, sordid poverty of the past, but the picturesque poverty of rank and position and insufficient means.

The vision pleased her, and she half closed her eyes and threw her head back to see it more clearly, and rested for a moment against Tom's shoulder, whilst his arms went round her, and held her as though protectingly.

Half she inclined to tell him that he had prevailed, and then again that sense of cynical amusement stole over her, because he was so simple in thus taking it for granted that he was the man she loved.

"If he were indeed the man I could love—if it were Anthony who pleaded like this—I suppose I should not hesitate," she thought, "poverty or no poverty; though I have vowed a thousand times that my head shall always rule my heart. What a fool I am! As though Anthony could be impassioned and fiery like this boy if his life depended on it. I wonder if I am really capable of loving any one, after all."

She was so busy with her fancies that she hardly heard the eager words in which Tom was painting the future, and when she brought her wandering attention back, she found that he was urging immediate marriage upon her.

"We must n't give any one time for arguing and objecting and forbidding and threatening," he said. "You 'll tell poor Thorverton directly he comes in, and you and your mother can return to London by the night train. I shall be waiting for you at Burstin Junction to escort you, and we 'll be married to-

morrow morning; and then I'll write and break it to my people. They won't like it, but the dear old governor will take my part, for it's the sort of thing he would have done himself, bless him. And besides, the thing being done, he'll know it's no use wasting words."

"You absurd boy. How could we be married to-morrow morning?"

"Very easily. You get a special licence for thirty bob. They have to give it you, and it's available directly you've got it. The only condition is that one of the parties must have resided in the district for fifteen days. I've had my present rooms for fifteen months. And we must be married in my parish church."

"Where did you find out all that?"

"In *Whitaker's Almanac*," he said simply.

Erica withdrew from the encircling arm, and went back to her chair.

"It's all very pretty and romantic—like a fairy tale—and just as likely to come true. But even if I loved you"—she recollected certain protestations, and smiled—"I suppose I do love you more or less—I certainly don't love you enough for that, dear Tom."

"You will," he said, but he paled a little. "Marry me, and I'll make you love me."

She looked at him and thought of Christopher—weighing the advantages and the disadvantages of marriage with either deliberately in her mind. "I can't be hustled like this," she pleaded. "Give me a little time."

"No," said Tom.

She looked up at him, surprised.

"No, sweetheart," he said gravely. "I'm yours to

take or to throw away. But not yours to play with any longer. Until I met you, I was never ashamed to look any man in the face. I 'm ashamed to look poor Thorverton in the face now. I 'm in a false position, and I won't occupy it any longer."

"I 'll write to you," she said, wavering.

Tom had never looked more handsome, nor more manly. She was loath to let him go; but she remembered the earlier sensation of that afternoon, and regretfully, almost resentfully, decided that she must.

"I can't," she said.

"Then good-bye," said Tom. Though his face was pale, he did not falter. He took her hand and looked into her eyes. "Nobody loves you as I do—the soul of you—that you 're trying with all your might to kill, Erica," he said steadily. "It is n't only your beauty I love, though it may be—I can't tell—I don't know—only because of your beauty that I care for your soul. But my love for you is n't selfish. It 's not. I know that. And you may call me a Methodist parson or what you choose, but you know all the time, in your heart of hearts, that you 're throwing away your best chance of salvation, when you let me go and marry a fellow you despise, for his money. Good-bye, I shan't come here again."

Her beautiful face, with its soft red and white colour, and sweet parted lips, looked so pure and noble that his heart ached afresh with love and longing and grief; because his reason forced him to despise her, even while he yearned after her.

"Melodrama never amused me," she said.

"Keep those cheap sneers for Thorverton," said Tom quietly. "They hurt him."

He moved towards the fireplace.

"If you 'll excuse me, I 'll ring and ask them to bring my horse round."

He did so, and talked of indifferent subjects both before and after Cloberry's entry. Something in his manner prevented even Erica from attempting to bring back the conversation to more personal subjects.

When Cloberry announced that his horse was waiting, he shook hands with her, and said good-bye with cheerful politeness; and Erica recognised that, even though he might lack her adroitness in double-dealing, Tom's powers of self-command and *nonchalance* were fully equal to her own.

She felt unusually low-spirited as she heard the hall-door clang behind him.

The afternoon dusk had gathered, and, with only the firelight to illumine it, the great hall seemed full of shadow and gloom.

"Shall I turn on the lights, ma'am?" said Cloberry's soft voice.

"Yes, and, Cloberry, would you see that Mr. Thorverton has eggs and sardines, and all the things he likes for tea?" she said. "I promised him to remind you. And please have a good fire made in the study. We 're going to sit there after tea."

"Very good, ma'am."

Christopher came in presently, wet and tired, but in high good humour, for he had enjoyed his day.

"I say! By Jove! What a picture!" he cried, surveying from the archway the softly-lighted hall, the beautiful girl reclining in the lounge-chair, and the laden tea-table, with its burden of silver and china, drawn up beside her.

"I 've sent tea upstairs to mamma, and May is at the Manor House, and Mr. Murch came in a few minutes ago and asked for a brandy-and-soda to be taken to his

bedroom. He was wet through, and said he must take something at once to keep off a chill; so we can have out tea together like Darby and Joan," said Erica.

"By Jove! That will be ripping!" he cried. "I'll have a tub and change like lightning, and come down. I won't be ten minutes."

It was the happiest evening Christopher had known for weeks.

Erica gave him his tea and smiled indulgently, instead of shrugging her shoulders in disgust, at the quantity of eggs and sardines, and the amount of whiskey which he consumed. She listened to his account of the morning's splendid run, and the afternoon's disappointment, with a sympathetic interest which he did not discover to be assumed; and when Lady Clow came downstairs, and May returned from the Manor House,—shy, flushed, happy, escorted by her grave cousin Anthony,—it was Erica who suggested in a whisper that Christopher should come away, and sit with her in his study, where there would be nobody to interrupt them.

Christopher was only too glad to follow her. The study was lighted only by the fire which Erica had ordered to be made there, and by the green-shaded electric reading-lamp which cast a glow over the writing-table and its silver appointments.

The curtains were drawn, and all looked snug, cheerful, and comfortable.

Christopher flung himself into a corner of the great morocco-covered sofa, with a sigh of utter content and fatigue.

"Poor old girl!" he said sleepily. "Your mother upstairs, and May out all the afternoon; you must have been jolly lonely."

"No, Tom Garry came to call upon me," said Erica.

He sat upright, and flushed a dull, angry red.

"You need n't be annoyed—or jealous—or anything," she said softly. "Poor Tom! He is n't coming again."

It made a very pretty story, as she told it, sitting pensive in the firelight, with the red glow playing on her jewelled dress, and burnished hair, and her lovely, downcast face, with its peachlike tints, and sweet, curved lips.

That Tom had loved her at first sight, as Christopher had always declared, and as she had never believed. That he had struggled against his own feelings, fearing to act dishonourably towards Christopher——

"I say! Poor chap!"

Christopher's jealousy was almost dead. He sat with open mouth, and eyes rather dim, listening to the tragedy of Tom's hopeless love; and Erica's revengeful enjoyment was whetted by the thought of the rage with which Tom would have heard the story told; in spite of the fact that she did him no injustice in the telling, but rather painted him in glowing colours, as a hero.

"So he 's going away, and never coming back," she ended with the simplicity of a true artist.

"By Jove!" said Christopher. He was silent for some time, and then he put an arm round Erica's waist and drew her towards him with a kind of gentle clumsiness, and said again, "Poor old girl!" and pecked at her cheek shyly. For unlike the Garrys he was inarticulate, and knew not how to express, either in words or action, the emotions of tenderness and gratitude and worship which possessed his boyish soul.

"So all you thought of when he first came in was that something had happened to me," he said exultantly.

"Hunting is so dangerous," said Erica. She remembered the terror that had possessed her at the thought of losing all that Christopher's love stood for, and the recollection caused her to yield herself more willingly to the embracing arm. "An accident happens in a moment, and then—" she said, and shuddered slightly.

"I know, I 've often thought of that," said Christopher. "You must n't think—I never think," he floundered in his speech, looking for words, which invariably eluded him at the critical moment. "Look here," he said desperately, "I can't tell you—but—I 'll show you something."

He drew away his arm so abruptly that his shirt-cuff caught the lace of her sleeve, and tore it, and delayed him while he begged her pardon and she extricated herself.

Then he went to the writing-table, and, with a key that hung from his watch-chain, he unlocked the middle drawer, and took out a long envelope.

"When we were engaged," he said, "I thought directly—I told May—you can ask her if I did n't—what a thing it would be if anything happened to me before we got married. I could n't bear to think what a—what a difference it would make to you—and of your being left unprovided for, and as you did n't seem to want then—to get married for a bit" —he pulled the thick, folded document out of the envelope, and turned over the pages hurriedly, by the light of the green lamp—"I sent to old Gethell, and made him draw up a temporary will."

He stopped short with a sudden exclamation. "By

Jove, what an owl I am! I never signed it. I'll ring the bell and get Cloberry and Joe Murch to come and witness it this very minute. And you can read this—only this bit here."

He pointed out a paragraph to Erica, who came to him quickly, and looked over his shoulder, and read that to his betrothed wife, Erica Jennifer Clow, he gave the sum of twenty thousand pounds, free of legacy duty.

Cloberry came, and was sent to fetch Mr. Murch, and together they witnessed Christopher's signature, while Erica stood before the fire and watched them. As soon as they had finished, Cloberry withdrew, with one discreet glance at the beautiful majestic form of his master's future wife, standing so motionless and statue-like beside the hearth, but Joe Murch lingered.

"Well, ol' man," he said, shaking his head reproachfully, "I've done what you asked me. I'd do anything for you, and you know it. But this means that any legacy for me—you said it was your will, I did n't look at it—is null and void. If you've put me down for anything, null and void, you understand. I don't know much law, ol' man but I know enough for that."

"That's all right. You're not mentioned. Why the deuce should you be?" said Christopher.

"Aw' right, aw' right. You know best what your wishes are. I should have thought you'd have remembered an ol' pal," said Mr. Murch, who had evidenlty taken almost too stringent precautions against the threatened chill, for he seemed about to weep, and his face was flushed almost to purple.

"If you'll take yourself off now, like a good chap, I'll put you down for a trifle in the next," said Christopher, soothingly. "This is a temporary job, and

only holds good until my wedding-day. Though I don't see, after all, considering you 're my senior, why you should make so infernally sure you 're going to outlive me," he added, rather crossly.

CHAPTER XXII

ON the morning after the signing of Christopher's will, May entered the hall, dressed for walking, in her little, rough serge suit, and a black beaver hat.

As she was searching the stand for the walking-stick she preferred, Erica came quickly along the passage from Christopher's study into the outer hall.

"Are you going for a walk? May I come with you?" she asked, with unusual animation.

"Of course," said May, and added apologetically, "The reason I did not ask you was that I thought Chris was not going to hunt to-day, because of his cold. I heard him counter-order his horse, so I supposed you would be with him. Is he going out, after all?"

"No, he imagines he is worse—you know what a fuss a man makes even about a little thing like a cold in the head—and he is sitting over the fire, very cross, and very sorry for himself. That is why I want to come out with you," said Erica coolly. "If there is one thing I dislike more than another, it is being shut up in a close room with somebody who has a cold. The colds I catch from other people are always so much worse than the colds I catch for myself. I 'll fly and put on my things. Wait for me. I won't be a moment."

She went slowly upstairs, and May, foreseeing a delay of twenty minutes or so, looked regretfully at the fleeting November sunshine, and then went into

the banqueting-hall, where Lady Clow was seated at a writing-table in the window, breathing heavily over a letter she was inditing.

She was one of those persons who seem obliged to form with their lips each word that they put on paper, and she was busily muttering to herself, "Exceeding my fondest hopes," when May came in.

"How nice and neat you look, my dear, in that sensible, plain frock," said Lady Clow, seizing the opportunity to lay down her pen and enter into conversation. "I wish you could persuade Erica to wear shady hats, as you do. That black beaver of yours would set off her beautiful hair so wonderfully. Not that it does not look very well on you—and nothing could be more delicate than your complexion. But I often fear that Erica tries herself too high, with her odd, æsthetic things. They may be the fashion; but they allow her face and neck to get burned by the sun. Even in November there is often quite a glare in the country." She shook her head disapprovingly at the sunlit park, as she regarded it through the window before her. "When I was young we were taught to take such care of our complexions. My one terror is that Erica may grow coarse through her own fault, for when she was a child she had a flawless skin."

"Erica is coming out with me now," said May.

"I am very glad you have been able to coax her to take a little exercise. It is the best possible thing for her figure," said Lady Clow, who could never persuade herself that everybody was not as eagerly interested in the welfare of her child as she was herself. "When Dr. Dobree came over to see me the other day, about my rheumatism, he would have it that exercise was the cure for everything; and I said:

'It 's all very well for you, who weigh nine or ten stone'—you know, my love, what a shrimp he is—'but for me, who have to carry more weight than I care to mention about with me wherever I go, taking exercise becomes a very serious effort—very serious indeed.'" Her light eyes grew round and piteous. "I hope you will never be as stout as I am, May; but one can never tell. It 's a great disadvantage. Ah, you smile!" she said, with a good-humoured sigh; "but I can tell you I should have smiled at your age if any one had talked to me of growing stout. I was slighter than you are now when I married."

May received this perfectly accurate statement with the indulgent incredulity natural to her age.

"I dare say she thinks so, poor old thing!" she reflected; but aloud she merely said: "Why don't you come a little way with us now? It 's a lovely day."

"No, my dear. I prefer walking alone when I walk at all, or I dare say it might be all very well with you, for you are wonderfully kind and considerate, but Erica flurries me so that I cannot risk it. My heart is weak, and I get hot and uncomfortable. I am better pottering up and down the drive by myself. Where are you going?"

"I meant to take the Newfoundland for a run, and then go and see Cousin Rosabelle; but as Erica is coming——"

"My dear, I wish you could persuade Erica to call upon Lady Denys with you. She ought to be more civil to Christopher's relations. It is no use my saying anything to her—you know how she snaps my head off—but she might listen to you. You are so full of tact. I 'm sure I don't know what I should do without you here. I shall miss you dreadfully

when all this is over, and I toddle back to my little home. I wish you were my daughter, I 'm sure, and that you were coming back to Kensington with me."

May could not honestly echo Lady Clow's wish; but she said, kindly and tactfully, as her manner was:

"We shall meet often. You know you are sure to be here a good deal."

"No, my dear. I don't think I am sure of anything of the kind. Erica is not very fond of having me about. I would n't say so to any one but you, May,"—the facile tears gathered in her round, blue eyes—"for of course it is a grief to me, though I can't altogether blame the poor child. People are so unkind. They have put it into her head that she is bound to become as stout as I am in the end, though, unless things go by contraries, she will be nothing of the kind, for when I was her age I was nothing but a threadpaper. No, no; I shall see her in London, I expect, far more often than you will see me down here."

"Christopher does not like London," said May.

"Ah, my dear, gentlemen often talk like that before marriage, and afterwards they are apt to find out that they like what their wives like! And you must remember your dear brother is very young. His tastes will change completely. You have no idea how people change at that age."

May did not think that Christopher would change in this respect, but she did not say so; and at this moment Erica appeared, very becomingly dressed in dark red cloth, with a little ruby velvet cap perched on her auburn hair, in daring contrast, but nevertheless highly effective and picturesque.

"You see, no shade for her face," sighed Lady Clow

plaintively. "Erica, if you would but wear nice, shady hats, like May—or even carry a parasol."

"A parasol in November!"

"I see no reason why you should not take a sunshade out in November, as well as in June, when there is a blinding sun," said Lady Clow.

Erica did not deign to answer. She asked May impatiently if she were ready to start.

"Ready to start? Of course she is ready to start! She has been waiting for you this half hour; and why is n't dear Christopher going with you? Where is he?"

"In his study."

"What is he doing? He is never in his study at this time of day."

"How can I tell you what he is doing? He has a crying cold, and is very unpleasant," said Erica impatiently.

"A crying cold! Then he is very wise to stay indoors. I wonder if he would take a little of my cinnamon? It would cure him in a moment. I think I shall go and ask him."

"I advise you not to do anything of the kind. He is as cross as a bear with a sore head. Mr. Gethell has been writing to him, and you know how fond Christopher is of attending to business," said Erica sarcastically.

"She talks flippantly, my dear; but she does n't mean it. She is as anxious about dear Christopher as any of us," said Lady Clow, with a nervous smile.

"I wish you would n't always try to explain me away, mamma. I never say anything I don't mean," said Erica, exasperated.

The two set forth across the park, taking the road

that led past the lake and through the little glen, fringed with mighty oaks, which had been the scene of more than one meeting between Erica and Robin.

They climbed the wooded road, which wound upwards to the high ground, whereon the cricket-field lay.

The morning was perfect, as a still November morning in the West of England can be. Probably it would cloud over later in the day; but just now the weather was brilliant.

They trod a carpet of brown and red leaves, for the lane was arched and canopied with autumn foliage, framing a vista of blue haze, whereon the distant hills were faintly painted by the sun.

There was a goodly smell of wet earth, and the robins sang loudly, breasting the sunshine which glinted through the trees.

The sycamore was already bare, and the poplar pointed chill rods blankly to the sky; but the beech was glowing yet, and the oak clung to its burden of gold, as loath as any miser to lay it down; the summer green of the ash, which she had donned so much later and which had worn so much better than the apparel of her brethren, began to look out of place; and the dark ilex and laurel awaited their moment of triumph.

The autumn mist, that would have been grey in cloudy weather, shone blue in the sunlight, and the mistletoe's white berries were turned to silver, and the fiery crab-apple burned scarlet on leafless boughs.

Presently the two girls reached the plantation which sheltered the cricket-ground.

Here the delicate, fading spires of the larch—dying beauties, prinked out in palest shades of yellow and amber and russet brown—showed forth against the clear blue of the sky, where, so far as the eye could see, were only one or two high-floating, fleecy clouds;

while, clad in copper, the brave armies of bracken stood shoulder to shoulder, stiff in death.

They passed the cricket-ground, and the open country lay to their right—little farms, with cob walls enclosing square yards; old thatched ricks, humble blue-slated roofs, and red plough and green down, and brown water glinting in the sun.

"I think we might rest," said Erica. She was completely out of training, and the stiff climb had rendered her too breathless for conversation.

May was quite willing to rest.

She assisted her companion to mount to the top rail of a substantial, white gate, hung between two sturdy holly trees, which guarded a gap in the hedge; and she stood, leaning against the gate beside Erica, looking over the surrounding scenery contentedly.

"Does all that belong to Christopher?" asked Erica, vaguely indicating the prospect, when she had more or less recovered breath.

May shook her head.

"I cannot tell you what the boundaries of the Moreleigh estate are. I only know that there are about twelve thousand acres."

"I am none the wiser," said Erica drily. "It sounds a good deal; but I don't happen to know how much an acre may be."

"Nor I," said May. "At least, I believe it is four roods."

"And pray, what is a rood?"

"I have not the faintest idea," said May, laughing.

"You can't think how much prettier you are when you laugh," said Erica, watching her. "I wonder why you are generally so serious?"

May coloured.

"Serious is only another word for dull, I am afraid."

"No. You are not dull; and I fancy you are more serious with me than with other people, because you disapprove of me."

May was silent.

"You know you do," persisted Erica; "just as you dislike talking—what shall I say?—personalities."

"I dislike it very much," said May, flushing.

"But how are we going to live together, after Christopher and I are married, if you insist upon always holding me at arm's length?"

"I am sorry if you think I do that," said May, distressed. "Indeed, I do not mean it."

"That 's why it hurts," said Erica. She bent her shrewd, light eyes on to the upturned, oval face of her prospective sister-in-law, and thought to herself discontentedly, "It does n't matter what she wears—she has that look—why can't I have it? It 's like the Garrys—the little air, so simple and so well-bred—the delicate features—mine are as good, but——"

Aloud she remarked:

"The things people say and do on purpose to hurt you, never hurt. It 's what they can't help showing—what they try to hide——"

"I 'm sorry," said May again. "But, don't you think—" she hesitated—"don't you think it 's better not to put these things into words? Things seem to mean so much more when they are spoken—to become so—so——"

"So blatant and obvious. But then, to me, it is your dislike and distrust of me that are so blatant and obvious. They burst forth through all your efforts to hide them," said Erica, with a dramatic gesture that came near to destroying her balance.

"Take care," said May, smiling a little. Then, after

a pause, she added with an effort. "You are wrong, Erica. I do not dislike you."

"You can't deny that you mistrust me?"

May was silent again.

"And that you would prevent me from becoming your sister-in-law, if you could," said Erica.

"No, I would n't," said May surprised. "It would make Chris very unhappy."

"But you must own that you dislike the thought of my becoming his wife."

May coloured painfully and hesitated.

"You are engaged to Christopher, so perhaps you have a right to ask that," she said. "Indeed, Erica, in many ways I think it will be a very good thing for him to marry you. You will have a much greater influence over him than I could ever have, and you are cleverer than he, and will guide him and take care of him, in a thousand ways that I could not."

"There is a popular notion—though experience has proved its fallacy—that a husband takes care of his wife, not a wife of her husband," said Erica.

"I did not say I thought it would be a good thing for you to marry Christopher. I said I thought it might be a good thing for Christopher to marry you," said May simply.

"You think I ought to marry a man older than myself?"

"I said nothing of the sort; and I can't see why you should wish to force me to express any opinion at all on the subject," said May, with some spirit.

"But that is what I mean when I say that you keep me at arm's length," said Erica, with a rather hard laugh. "You see, we have travelled round in a circle. Yet I would give a good deal," she continued—and her deep voice took a note of softness

that would have touched May, had it not been for an uncomfortable conviction, of which she was unable to rid herself, that Erica was watching its effect upon her—"I would give a good deal to have you for my friend. But you prefer Kathleen Garry—that little, shallow, laughing creature."

"She is not shallow," said May indignantly. "She has high spirits, and a playful manner. Her real self, underneath, is true and tender and warm-hearted."

"True and tender and warm-hearted!" repeated Erica mockingly. "That is what no one will ever call me. And yet. . . . I lay awake half the night —though I dare say you will not believe me—resolving to be a good wife to Christopher; though you all think me so ungrateful and heartless."

"Why should I not believe you? And I do not think you so heartless as you like to make yourself out," said May.

Erica started. It was as though Tom's voice sounded in her ears. *"I have known all along that you were not really heartless, a great deal of it is pose, like so much that one regrets in you."*

She was suddenly and strangely possessed by a restless feeling of she knew not what—of regret and longing and shame.

It was true that her night had been wakeful—tormented by unaccustomed doubts of herself, and by pangs of a self-reproach so novel that she had hardly recognised them for what they were, yet found they could only be assuaged by the dim formation in her mind of some such vague resolves as the one she had mentioned to May.

She had been more touched than Christopher had dreamed by that paragraph in his will, which she had read over his shoulder on the previous evening. She

had even been surprised into a momentary feeling of tenderness towards the boy, who had thus been attempting to safeguard her future, while she was still cynically contemplating the possibility of jilting him in favour of Tom Garry.

She had formed a careless, royal resolve that he should be rewarded for his thought of her, and that she would reign a queen over Moreleigh, and over his fortunes, and over the entire neighbourhood, and would show Tom Garry that her salvation did not, in the least, depend upon him, nor upon marriage with him.

But though she had waked from a late, uneasy slumber in the full ardour of these resolutions, the first moments of renewed intercourse with Christopher had sufficed to damp that ardour considerably.

The Christopher who appeared at breakfast—cross and unlovely, with a heavy, unromantic cold in his head, disappointed of his day's hunting, and sulking over his disappointment, like a spoilt boy, angry with the post which brought him business letters he knew not how to deal with—this was the Christopher who aroused her contempt and disgust.

May was grieved when she beheld her brother thus, and not infrequently a little frightened, for Christopher was apt to throw down and knock over inanimate objects, that happened to be in his way, when he was desirous of venting his ill-humour; but on this occasion she made allowance for his cold, his disappointment, and his real bewilderment and vexation over Mr. Gethell's lengthy communications.

Erica made no such allowance, as perhaps was natural. Christopher's faults happened to be those, of all others, for which she had least toleration, since they arose from weakness, want of self-control, and

incompetence to manage his own affairs. Her good resolutions were shaken. She left Christopher to his grumbling over the lawyer's papers, and started forth to join May in her walk, hoping that the fresh air might restore her spirits.

"Were you going over to the Manor House?" she asked abruptly.

"I was; but perhaps—if you were thinking of calling upon Cousin Rosabelle, as your mother seemed to wish—it would be better to go this afternoon," said May hesitatingly. "My just going in to read the newspaper to her for half an hour, or to cut the pages of her novel, she does not count as a visit. She is not very fond of morning visitors, otherwise."

"I don't blame her," said Erica. "Though she did give me leave to go when I liked. However, I am not particularly keen on going at all, unless. . . ." She was struck by a sudden idea. "Yes, let us go this afternoon. After all, it will be something to do."

To herself she said:

"I will give myself one last chance of—would it be happiness? I wonder. I will beard him in his den once more—Mr. Denys in his workshop—St. Anthony in the wilderness. I will ask him his advice, and he will snub me in his cold, distant, priggish way, and I shall hate him, and get rid of my last, lingering, stupid doubts and yearnings and fancies—for ever, and settle down contentedly to be rich. . . ."

"Would you mind coming down with me to that cottage, for a minute," May said hesitatingly, as they resumed their walk. "There is an old labouring man there, who is dying, and Dr. Dobree said he could have anything he fancied. I should like to ask him what he does fancy."

"I don't mind at all," said Erica, in mood to be gracious.

She minded because she disliked constitutionally everything that was ugly and disagreeable; and the interior of this cottage was ugly, and the conditions under which its inhabitants lived were to her disagreeable, although the little, close kitchen, into which she presently followed May, was spotlessly clean.

An aged agricultural labourer lay dying in the inner room, screened off from the kitchen by a thin, boarded, whitewashed partition.

His wife bustled to receive his visitors, and seemed surprised that Erica should remain in the outer room, instead of proceeding at once to the bedside, as May did. But, with the courtesy of her class, she made no comment, merely polishing a wooden chair with her apron, and setting it next to the fire.

Through the open doorway, Erica could see the grey, sunken face of the dying man, and the knotted hand, discoloured with half a century's labour, which grasped an old, red handkerchief, wherewith from time to time he wiped the furrowed forehead beneath the straggling white hair.

He smiled when May entered, seeming quite content, and unconscious of the discomfort that surrounded his death-bed.

"I don't want for nart," he said bravely. "Nay, I want for nart. I be takin' of a vine rest. Parson Amery, he bin up along, vur tu zee I; and Squire Anthony, him bin up time and again—sent I a brace of pheasants and tu bottle of part wine. The wust of it be, I bain't got my happytite. But I du like the part wine. 'T is proper gude stuff."

"If there was anything you fancied—" said May.

"Well, miss, 't es the curiousest of things, but I

cude fancy a pig's fute; and my wife, her 's bin out lukin' vor one arl over, but zeem there bain't one to be got. 'T is gen'ly a easy thing tu come by; but zo 't is," he said apologetically.

"He bin axin' for that, and he bain't axed for nart else," said the old woman to Erica, as May promised to have the coveted dainty procured with as little delay as possible.

"What are you doing with that old stocking?" Erica asked curiously.

The old woman was stretching a white cotton stocking over her hands, pulling it this way and that

"I 'm stretching it for him," she answered calmly, nodding her head towards the sick man. "'T is for his laying out."

Erica turned away with an abrupt gesture of disgust. Her attention was caught by the sound of Anthony's name.

"Squire Denys brart that there picture vur tu hang tu the fute of my bed, vur he knowed I got turble tired lukin' at that there arminack. His pictures they be zo natural as life. There be Westacombe, were I wor barn—over they blue hills where you zee the monyment. 'T is a matter of nine miles vrom here, as the crow du fly. I bain't a Marleigh man. I be a foreigner in these parts," he gasped.

May offered him the mug of cider which stood by his bedside, but he waved it away. He was eager to talk.

"That there picture be vull of memories," he said. "What wi' Westacombe up over, and down along by they drees the great meddar as I used tu be able tu mow in tu days, when I was a young yuth. Tu shillun a acre they paid I vort. Nowadays they gives

vive shillun. I brart up my vambly on eight shillun a week. The wages be turble high tu what they used tu be. Turnips was all we'd have vor dinner zum days—turnips mashed, and glad to get 'un. My zuns were n't brart up on butcher's meat, like my grandzuns du be. But my grandzuns cude n't du a day's wark, and luke over the hedge vor a job afterwards, zame as I cude, when I wur a young yuth."

He chuckled faintly.

"He 's wonderful contented," said the old woman dispassionately. "You wude n't believe how he suffers; night-times specially."

"Why for shude n't I be contented?" said her husband. "I done my duty zo well as iver I cude. The Lard will take that into consideration, when he be a-judgin' of I. Why doantee ax that young lady tu come in vur tu zee me? I be glad of visitors, Miss, vur the days be turble long indars, vur a man as is used to work in the open."

Erica advanced reluctantly, and stood in the doorway, looking down upon the bed.

"Lard, yu be a pretty maid," he said.

"Yu 'me please tu excuse," said the old woman. "The old man forgets his manners, but he don't mean no harm. He 's always bin one to set turble store by lukes, zo he 's bound to take notice on yu. Tu hear 'un go on about Squire Denys, yu 'd think he were clean rampin' mazed."

"I don't go vur to compare the prettiest maid in the Kingdom wi' Squire Anthony, woman," said the old man contemptuously. "Vur why? 'T is the beautivul soul of 'un shining thru' as I zees. 'T is mar like the vace of a angel than a man tu I, when he du come down along vur to zee I. A thousand pities as he war n't barn a working-man, vur he 's the

only gintleman I iver come acrass as cude a-earned his living wi' his tu hands."

Christopher sat in the study before his writing-table. He was in low spirits, partly because he really did not feel well, partly because he had received a long letter from Mr. Gethell which he had to read, and even answer, and partly because he was growing increasingly conscious that, in the absence of an agent, business was accumulating daily with which he was powerless to cope.

In truth, he missed the ubiquitous Captain Sandry sorely.

"I wish he had n't turned out such a scamp," he thought impatiently; "and I wish Gethell would make haste and find somebody else. There must be thousands of decent chaps who 'd jump at a job like this. If only he 'd choose one, instead of sending me their beastly testimonials and letters to look at. It will end in my having to go up to London and find somebody for myself; and then, what 's the good of Gethell? I might just as well not be bothered with him at all. I wish he would n't be so infernally conscientious."

He turned over a pile of documents listlessly, and then, suddenly looking at the clock, and observing that it was half-past eleven, he brightened up, and rang for port wine and biscuits.

After imbibing this refreshment, he felt, as he would have expressed it, much less slack, and, indeed, so full of courage that he boldly collected all Mr. Gethell's laboriously edited applications for the vacant billet, and tossed them into a drawer.

"I 'll consult old Anthony before I answer any of them," he reflected; "and if he thinks it all right, I 'll wire to Gethell to tell him to settle the matter

on his own, without bothering me about it at all. After all, that 's what he 's for; it 's no use keeping a dog and barking yourself."

He went back to the arm-chair by the fire, picked up the *Sporting Times*, which lay on the table next the tray of port wine and glasses, and began to read.

There was a knock at the door, a short yelp, as of a puppy being kicked, and Joe Murch showed his red face cautiously.

Perceiving that Christopher was alone, and perceiving yet more joyfully that the hour of port wine had arrived, he entered the room with the pink-eyed Bingo crouching at his heels.

"I would n't have disturbed you if you 'd been busy, ol' man," he said, shutting the door and advancing towards the tray of glasses with a glad smile. "But I thought you must be alone, and I was afraid you might be feeling moped. I watched the ladies settin' out across the park in the sunshine—a day to tempt anybody out of doors—but I said to myself: 'No, Joe! Your ol' pal is grousin' over the fire, with a beast of a cold in his head, feeling as chippy as he can feel after a hard day's huntin'. I 'll stick by him, if nobody else does.' Besides, to tell you the truth, ol' man," said Joe, with the decanter in one hand and a glass in the other, "I 've got a touch of rheumatism myself this morning. It 's no joke, getting wet to the skin, for a chap that 's not very strong like me. I took a nip of brandy the minute I got in, and that saved me. But I feel it in my shoulder all the same."

Chris sneezed several times in succession, and drew closer to the fire.

"There you go, ol' man! There you go! You 're in for it," said Joe. "You should have dosed your-

self with brandy last night, same as I did. I dare say I should even have escaped this touch of rheumatism, if you had n't sent Cloberry upstairs to fetch me, just as I was falling into a beautiful sleep, rolled in a blanket. Cloberry came to my door, and made such a hullabaloo, I thought, for the moment, the house must be on fire. But when I found you wanted me, I bundled on my clothes and came down."

"Of course I did n't know you were asleep," growled Christopher. "I could easily have got some one else. There are plenty of people in the house besides you. A footman would have done as well."

"That 's what I told Cloberry. But you know what he is, ol' man. Faithful to his master's interests," said Joe, growing sentimental over his second glass. "This the Jubilee port? 'Eighty-seven? 'Pon my soul, it 's uncommon good."

"Cloberry 's all right," said Christopher.

"I wish every one in the house was as devoted to your interests as he is, ol' man," said Joe Murch; and he broke a biscuit in half as a kind of excuse for taking a third glass of port.

"What d' ye mean?"

"I 'm the las' man in the world to make mischief," said Joe. "And especially now, when— I don't want to reproach you, Chris; it 's not my way. My friend can do no wrong—that 's my motto—but lately you 've been so short with me at times that it 's been a hard thing for me to know what to do. A man does n't like to stand by and not utter a word of warning, and yet he does n't like to speak out for fear of being taken amiss and called names that cut him to the heart."

"What the devil are you driving at? Give me the port," said Chris. "And say what you mean, if you mean anything."

"It's dangerous for a man to say what he means sometimes, especially when a woman's concerned," said Joe cautiously. "After you with that decanter, ol' man."

"Whom are you talking about?"

"I don't want to name names," said Joe, "I don't; 'pon my soul I don't. No fellar would give a woman away if he could help it. But what's a chap to do when he sees his best friend being made a fool of?"

The blood rushed to Christopher's face, and his eyes grew bright.

"If you were already married, there'd be nothing to be said. Nobody meddles between man and wife; at least, not if they've got any sense, they don't. But you ain't married yet; and suppose you come to me a few months hence, and say: 'Joe, you knew all about this. Why did you let me go blindfold into the noose when a word from you might have saved me?' What would I answer then?" asked Joe, striking the table, and making the glasses jingle. "What would I answer then, Chris, ol' man?"

"I don't care what you'd answer. If you go maundering on in this infernal way much longer, I shall lose my temper," said Chris angrily. "Will you speak plainly, and have done with it?"

"I'm speaking as plain as I know how," protested Joe. "If you want your 'i's' dotted and your 't's' crossed, you must promise me to keep calm, or I can't go on. I'm as nervous as a cat this morning. Look here"—and, indeed, his hand trembled exceedingly as he helped himself for the fifth time.

"Of course I'll keep calm. What do you suppose I care what you say?" growled Christopher. "Only I hate hinting, and things like that; and if people have got anything to say, I wish they'd say

it. I know it's one of your confounded mare's nests."

But he moved uneasily as he spoke, and mingled anxiety and impatience were discernible in the deepened lines of his sullen face.

"Well, it's like this ol' man," said Joe. "Of course, mind you, it's natural you'd be the last person in the world to hear—but one person tells another, and at last it comes round to me. That Miss Clow is carrying on with young Garry, while she's engaged to you, is the talk of the place."

Chris stared at him.

"You may look; but it's true. Every one knows he's in love with her and most believes she's just as much in love with him, and only marrying you for your money. Else, as they say, what does she encourage him to be in and out here all the time for? And why——"

He was startled by Christopher's loud laugh.

"Is that all? You old gaby! I know all about that."

Mr. Murch's jaw dropped, and his eyes started out of his head.

"Of course I do. She told me all about it herself."

"She told you?"

Christopher took a boyish pleasure in observing the stupid discomfiture of Erica's would-be traducer.

"Of course she told me! She tells me everything. What do you know about engaged people?"

"She told you all about his meeting her down in the glen by the lake, and kissing her, and all that, which the old mole-catcher saw, and one of the gamekeepers, and which all the village knows?"

Christopher was furious.

"Do they? D—— them! I'll sack the lot to-morrow. To go spying and cackling all over the place!"

Then his tone changed.

"Look here, Joe. Since you've got this nonsense into your head, I'll tell you the facts—in confidence, mind. You know how gossip of that sort gets ex-aggregated. But if—— if she did let young Garry kiss her, it was out of pity for a poor fellow dying of love for her; and he came over here, yesterday, and said good-bye to her for ever, and went away for good and all," said Christopher.

"Well, of course, it's all right, if you don't mind," said Joe Murch, looking bewildered. "But I did n't know he came here at all yesterday."

"He came here and wished her happiness, and went off to London. And she told me all about it in the evening afterwards, in this very room, bless her!" said Christopher simply. "And I can tell you I'm very sorry for poor Garry."

"Which Garry?" said Joe.

"Why, Tom, of course," said Christopher.

"But it's Bob Garry I'm talking about," said Joe, staring helplessly at him. "Tom is n't at all the sort of chap to go making love to another fellow's girl. But young Robin—they say he's after women, like a cat after the cream—same as his uncle was before him, the late Lord Erriff."

"Hold your tongue!"

Christopher jumped to his feet, and glared at Joe Murch, who stepped back in alarm.

"Aw' right. Aw' right," he said. "I'll say no more. You tole me to speak out. But I might have known you'd round on me for doing it, same as you always do," he interpolated bitterly. "That's all a

fellar gets for trying to be a good pal. But I did n't expect thanks. I did n't expect anything."

His eyes began to water, and, though he looked longingly at the port, he could not help himself again, because Chris was between him and the decanter.

"I thought you 'd have taken me by the hand," he said, showing an inclination to sob. "I thought you 'd have said: 'Joe, old fellow. Joe—'" He stopped suddenly, because his head, which was never of the clearest, was becoming confused: partly from the quantity of wine which he had already taken, and partly from his alarm at the whiteness of Christopher's face.

"But if she told you all about it, there 's no more to be said," he repeated stupidly.

"Of course she 's told me all about it," said Christopher roughly.

"Only, it wassen Tom. It was Bob. I mean, it wassen Bob. It was Tom," said Joe, with bewildered, red-rimmed eyes staring helplessly at Christopher. "That 's how the mistake arose."

Christopher's hands, with the square fingers and the blunt nails, which Erica had noticed, twitched nervously. He was trying to make up his mind what should be said to Joe, and how best to say it.

"I 've got to think for her, as well as me," he reflected uneasily. "It 's her good name may suffer, with these fools gossiping."

"Look here, Joe," he said, speaking deliberately and distinctly, as he sometimes did when he was very much in earnest. "You pull yourself together and listen to me."

"I 'm listening, ol' man," said Joseph. "I 'm listening." And he fixed his eyes with extraordinary attention on Christopher's face. "Listening with all my

heart and soul," he added, with almost unnecessary emotion.

"There 's got to be no more mistakes of that kind about Miss Clow," said Chris slowly. "Because if there are, I 'll make it hot for somebody. I don't care who—but whoever it is that 's her enemy, and is spreading reports of this kind about her, I 'll make it hot for. And if you 're my friend, like you 're always gassing about, you 've got to let everybody know they 're not true. I shan't take any notice, because it 's beneath my dignity. But you can just go for any one spreading these tales. Go for them, and if there 's any damages to be paid," said Christopher, struck with a brilliant idea, "I 'll see you through. But her name must n't be brought in, mind that, Joe. And all this is in strict confidence between you and me."

Joe Murch caught his hand and wrung it earnestly. It was becoming increasingly difficult for him to find words.

"I know all about Tom, and I know all about young Robin," said Christopher slowly. "He 's a friend of my sister's, and he comes here to see her. And since I 'm trusting you like this, I may as well tell you that his mother wishes it, and I wish it, and Erica 's as anxious for it to come off as any one."

By an almost superhuman effort—and with his eyes starting nearly out of his head in the attempt to keep them fixed steadily on Christopher's face—Joe Murch fathomed his meaning.

"That 's all right, ol' man, and I understand purfally. But, that being so," he lowered his voice, cunningly, "tha' being so, if I was you, I would ask Bob Garry his intentions. Tha 's the right thing for you to do. You standing, as you do, in the place of

her father. Tell him he 's getting himself talked about with the wrong girl, and it 's time he spoke out, and told you what his intentions are. Then, if he has n't got any intentions, I go for him, and in case of damages, you see me through."

He smiled foolishly, but Christopher did not smile.

Through all his friend's confusion of ideas, he grasped at the one which appealed to him.

"I say, by Jove," he said, "I should n't wonder if you were right, Joe. If the fellow does n't mean anything, he ought n't to be always hanging about. Poor little May. It 's true I stand in the place of a father to her."

"I 'm the las' man to buck about myself, ol' man, but I 'm gen'ly right. Few men know the world better than I do," said Joe confidently. "I only wish my shoulder did n't hurt me so. I believe it would do me good to go and lie down on the big sofa before the fire in the hall, and get thoroughly baked."

Christopher made no objection. He did not move from his seat; and Joe, after a single regretful backward glance at the almost empty decanter, took himself and his white bull-terrier pup out of the room.

As the door closed, the alert expression on the face of the young master of the house died out, and a dejected, weary look replaced it. He went slowly to the writing-table, and leaned his elbows on his desk, and his head on his hands.

"I 'll ask old Anthony's advice," he thought. "I dare say it 's all right, what Joe said about asking Robin his intentions, and that. But Joe does n't really know, though he 's not a bad old sort, and I never understand about doing the right thing. I 'll ask old Anthony about that, and about Gethell and the papers, and everything else."

CHAPTER XXIII

"THE morning began too brightly, and it 's clouded over already. It will rain as usual this afternoon," said Lady Clow, plaintively. "I wish I had had my little potter this morning. I did think of it, but I had a letter to write; and then the girls interrupted me going out for their walk; and then they interrupted me again coming in, and so the morning slipped away. And now I am pretty sure the best of the day is over," she said, shaking her head dismally over her slice of roast pheasant.

The small talk, which it had been the habit of Captain Sandry to contribute towards the conversation at meals, was woefully missed since his departure; but Lady Clow did her best to fill the vacancy thus caused. She could always be sure of a kind and polite response from May, though Erica habitually ignored her mother's remarks; Christopher rarely spoke at all at meals; and Joe Murch reserved any observations that occurred to him for Bingo, and preferred the wag of his dog's tail to any reply that a human being might have been inspired to offer.

In the course of luncheon a telegram was brought to May, who tore it open and read it aloud.

"*Miss Thorverton, Moreleigh.*

"*Robin returned unexpectedly. Both coming tea-time unless you wire to contrary.*—KATHLEEN."

"Thank you. No answer," she said to the footman.

"Shall we go over to the Manor House just the same, Erica?"

"Of course. We can be back long before tea-time," said Erica indifferently. "I want to call on Lady Denys."

Christopher did not lift his eyes from his plate; his expression was sullen, but, since his sullenness was not unusual, no one observed it.

"I hope you're taking care of your cold, dear Christopher," said Lady Clow anxiously. "I thought you were very wise to stop in this morning."

A growl was the civil response to this remark.

"Young men are so reckless," persevered poor Lady Clow, turning appealingly towards Mr. Murch, and forgetting he was not Captain Sandry, whom she had always found so kind and responsive.

"Lie still, Bingo," said Joe sternly.

"Shall you come across to the Manor House, Chris?" said Erica.

"I thought May was going with you," said Christopher, none too graciously.

"So she is. But if I know your beloved Cousin Rosabelle, she will tire of my company far sooner than she will tire of May's, and then if you were there you could have the pleasure of escorting me home."

"Somebody's got to be here to receive the Garrys," said Chris roughly.

Erica raised her eyebrows and shrugged her shoulders.

"I shall be back long before Robin and Kathleen could come to tea, Chris," said May, innocently. "Cousin Rosabelle won't ask me to stay when she knows they are coming."

Christopher's brow cleared slightly. There was a

faint gleam of satisfaction in the almost involuntary glance he bestowed upon Joe Murch.

"I don't think I shall go out," he said.

"How can you ask him, Erica, when he has such a terrible cold," cried Lady Clow, reproachfully.

"I shan't be able to hunt to-morrow if I don't get rid of it," said Chris gloomily. "My colds are always rotten. And damp always makes them worse. It 's begun to drizzle already.

"I 'll come back early," said Erica lightly, "and we 'll shut ourselves up together in the study and nurse your cold; while May takes Robin and Kathleen off to her snuggery, and they all three warble nigger melodies with the old banjo."

Christopher's face now wore a look of unmistakable triumph and satisfaction.

"No, no," he said, magnanimously. "I know you 're afraid of catching other people's colds. We 'll all sit together in the banqueting-hall, where there 's plenty of ventilation, and set the orchestrion going, and cheer ourselves up that way. I 'm sorry to be so hipped," he added, with unwonted grace, "but the fact is, nothing makes one feel so slack as a cold in the head."

"If you 'd only take a few drops of my cinnamon and put yourself to bed," said Lady Clow, shaking her head, with a melancholy wisdom that impressed nobody but herself. "It 's so much the quickest in the end."

Anthony was in his workshop, and engaged in the unromantic occupation of cleaning lamps, when Erica's voice in the doorway startled him.

"May I come in, Mr. Denys?"

"By all means."

"May is reading aloud to Lady Denys, and a sudden impulse seized me to come in and see you here instead of returning to the Abbey, as I had intended to do when I left them."

"Will you forgive me if I go on with my job?" said Anthony, thrusting a long, soft brush up a glass chimney and polishing it busily.

"Of course. May I wander about and look at everything?"

"I am afraid there is little that is worth your attention."

Anthony was, as usual when he was working, in his shirt-sleeves; but since he privately considered that it was Erica's presence, rather than his attire, in his own den, that required apology, he made no pretence of resuming his coat, nor of leaving off his humble occupation.

Erica watched him for a few moments in silence.

Before him stood a couple of old-fashioned silver reading-lamps, with green glass shades; and four more elaborate ones of old Dresden. A can of colza oil and another of petroleum stood ready to his hand; a large jar waited, as a receptacle, for the dregs of the lamps, and beside it was a plate with a pair of scissors for trimming the wicks.

A shelf was built conveniently above the table at which he worked, whereon reposed chimney-brushes of various sizes, soft linen cloths, chamois leathers, and balls and rolls of new cotton wick.

Anthony put the glass chimney, shining brilliantly, to one side, and began to trim the old wicks carefully.

"Why do you do all that?" Erica asked impatiently.

He looked up.

"I find that I do it better than the servants," he said simply. "They cut the wicks unevenly, and al-

low the oil to run over the outside of the lamps, by filling them too full. They cause them to smell, and allow them to get generally out of order for want of sufficient care; often only because they have to work in a hurry. My mother depends very much on her reading-lamp burning well and brightly, through the long evenings."

"Robin Garry said it would be very easy to install electric light here, with the waterfall so near," said Erica.

"Did he?" said Anthony, with a slight shade of coldness.

She turned abruptly from the table, and wandered round the workshop, looking at the sketches framed and unframed upon the wall.

These were Anthony's failures, for most of his successes were to be found in the cottages on the Moreleigh estate.

Erica paused, however, before a sketch that could not be described as a failure. A water-colour drawing of the Abbey against a sunset sky, with a study of cedars in the foreground.

She was too little familiar with art to recognise the different touch.

"When did you do this?"

He looked up and down again at his work.

"I did not do it," he said, and the peculiar quietness of the tone would have deterred many persons from asking further; but Erica was restlessly inclined and did not spare him.

"Who did?"

"The late Mrs. Thorverton."

Erica looked at it with renewed interest.

"Chris never speaks of his mother," she said presently. "He snubbed me so decidedly when I asked

him about her that I desisted. I do not even know why she left her husband."

"They separated by mutual consent. It is not a subject I care to discuss," said Anthony, with perfect courtesy, but with a firmness for which she was by no means prepared.

The colour rushed to her face.

Mr. Denys finished clipping the last wick, and fitted the chimneys of the lamps into their places.

"I wonder why you are so unkind to me?" she faltered.

"I have not the slightest wish to be unkind," he said gently. But there was a touch of surprised weariness in his tone which stung Erica's pride.

Her breath quickened, her bosom heaved; she came close to the table, looking very lovely in her ruby cap, and with that flush still deepening on her cheeks, and brightening by contrast her great china-blue eyes.

"Mr. Denys, do you ever read poetry?"

"I cannot say that I do."

"You never read at all?"

"I have not much time for reading."

"We have one thing in common then," she said, with a slight laugh. "I was going to quote some lines of poetry to you, although, as a matter of fact, I know no more poetry than you."

He seemed hurt.

"I did not say I did not know any poetry," he protested. "My mother used to read Shakespeare aloud to me when I was a little boy."

The mingled simplicity and dignity of this announcement moved Erica to inward laughter, in spite of her recent secret inclination to shed tears.

"Is this Shakespeare I am going to quote?" she

asked in an odd shaking voice. "I am so ignorant that I do not know.

"He either fears his fate too much,
Or his desert is small,
Who dares not put it to the touch
To win or lose it all."

She watched Anthony's face, but it showed no sign of consciousness.

He paused in his final polishing of the silver lamps; but evidently only to consider seriously the question of the authorship of the lines.

"I think it was Montrose who wrote them, in prison."

Erica laughed almost hysterically.

"You do not understand, or do you misunderstand on purpose?" she said. "Oh, if you would lay aside your reserve for one moment and speak to me as though I were a human being—a fellow-creature—and have a little—only a little—pity on me. Every one says you are worshipped in the village—that the poor people come to you for advice, and sympathy, and help. Why won't you give me help, and advice, and sympathy? What makes you so cold to me? What is it you dislike in me? What is it I lack?"

Anthony left off polishing, and resting the hand which held the leather upon the table, looked at her with grave, kind, surprised eyes.

Though he knew very well what Erica lacked, he could not tell her; and if he had been able to put his knowledge into words she would not have understood him.

Reserve, restraint, consideration for the feelings of others, were expressions that conveyed almost no meaning to Erica. She had been so long accustomed

to permit herself a perfect freedom of speech that she had no idea how many of her utterances jarred upon those whom she desired only to please.

She did not realise that the poetry of everyday life is as delicate as the iridescent dust on a butterfly's wings, and that if touched by a rude hand it is all brushed away.

She knew that she was curiously drawn towards Anthony; that his coldness at once attracted and piqued her, and that she desired intensely to break through the impalpable barrier of reserve which surrounded him; but she did not know that the casting aside of all reserve of her own was the most hopeless method she could have chosen in pursuit of her aim.

Nevertheless, it was no more given to Anthony than to most of his fellows to be able to witness the distress of a pretty woman unmoved.

With mingled embarrassment, annoyance, and sympathy he left his work, and came across to the packing-case, whereon, for lack of a more romantic seat, Erica had subsided, bathed in tears.

"If you will tell me what your trouble is, I will do my best to help you," he said kindly.

She sobbed hysterically and was for a moment really unable to speak—though she occupied the time in considering rapidly what she had better say, while Anthony waited.

Here was her chance. If she told him in words—what any other man in his place would, surely, have guessed long ago—would that coldness, which she sometimes hardly believed to be real, melt like snow in the sunshine of her beauty, and her love, and her distress?

Tom had said that with the man she loved lay her best chance of salvation. But suppose that Anthony

were the man she loved? He did not understand her as Tom did; he would not consciously help her to fight those besetting sins of which Tom had made Erica, for the first time in her life, realise the ugliness; but vaguely she felt, as Christopher had always and no less vaguely felt, the restfulness of the atmosphere in which Anthony dwelt.

She raised her weeping eyes, and looked up into the calm, noble face which was bent a little towards her, with grave and pitying expression; and tried in vain to analyse the attraction he held for her and for others.

He was not clever, nor amusing, nor interesting—as Erica counted these qualities; in the abstract she would have declared that such a personality must bore her—must bore any one.

But in reality she was never bored in the presence of Anthony; only restlessly desirous that he should think well of her. Could it be only because he had a fine person, a beautiful head, a dignified manner? She was half indignant and half amused because she could find no better reasons than these for the charm he unconsciously exercised over her. Or was it indeed, as the old dying man had declared, "the butivul soul of him shining through," that commanded her unwilling reverence?

Her light-blue eyes were drowned in tears, but her lips parted in a faint smile as she met his look.

"I won't beat about the bush, I will tell you my trouble."

He waited.

"What would you do—in my place," she said pathetically, "if you were engaged to one man and loved another?"

Anthony was silent.

"Please, speak quite frankly," she urged, under her breath. "Please, advise me frankly. It would be truest kindness. Even if you do not like me very much, you might in charity advise a girl in great doubt and perplexity. If you knew how unhappy I am——"

"I can believe it," he said gently.

She was surprised.

"I have been very sorry for you for some time past," he went on quietly, "and—forgive me—very sorry for Christopher."

"You have?" She felt vaguely that she did not understand; that the unexpected fulness of his compassionate response was somehow bewildering.

"And since you appeal to me so earnestly for advice I do not feel justified—for his sake as much as your own—in withholding it. In the circumstances you mention, I think you should take what appears to me the only honest and honourable course, and break off your engagement—before allowing the other man to make love to you again."

"Again!" Erica stared at him in mute amaze for the space of a moment. Then she understood. The blood rushed to her cheeks once more, and she hid her tearful eyes and burning face in her hands in an agony of shamed confusion, which came near to being the most real emotion she had ever experienced.

She understood.

There rose before her memory an almost forgotten summer afternoon when Robin had made love to her in the shade of the oaks, beside the Abbey lake, and when Anthony had ridden quickly past them, with face averted and the barest of bare salutes; and she realised that Anthony had seen and understood, and recognised them both.

That he was advising her in good faith and with this scene in his mind, she did not doubt for a moment, and with a dismayed leap of the heart she recognised the utter impossibility of following up her appeal for advice with the faltering avowal she had contemplated.

In the illumination of the moment Erica saw what such an avowal would look like to Anthony, who knew that she was betrothed to one man, and had seen her in the arms of another, and she perceived that the little scene she had meant to enact, with mingled dignity and pathos, became impossible. She saw it through Anthony's eyes, and in his presence the words she had meant to utter died upon her lips.

The first shock of shamed feeling was succeeded by an hysterical desire to laugh. She hardly heard Anthony's next words, and only caught the sense of the counsel he was reluctantly bestowing in answer to her own eloquent appeal.

"It is not too late—you are not married yet—and the breaking off of your engagement will give him the opportunity, which he no doubt desires, of coming forward in an honourable manner."

He did not understand the expression with which she looked at him: half humorous, half despairing.

"It 's no use," thought Erica. "Tom may talk of my starting fresh, and putting aside plotting and scheming, and being honest and true, and all the rest of it, but what 's the good? I must play up—I must play up."

She wiped her eyes with the lace handkerchief which she held, rolled into a tight little ball.

"I don't think—he can afford—to marry me," she said faintly.

"He should have thought of that before," said Anthony drily.

"Are n't you a little uncharitable?" she said pathetically. "One may get carried away—by a sudden temptation. Don't judge me too hardly."

"I am not judging you," said Anthony gently. "In these cases"—he spoke simply, as he thought simply, from the depths of his inexperience, and his chivalrous feeling, "it is the man who is to be blamed. He might have compromised you very seriously."

"I suppose he did," said Erica, with another pang of that half-comic despair, "since you saw me. I suppose you were n't surprised," she went on rather bitterly, "for you have never really trusted me. You are like poor little May. Only she has tried hard to like me, and you have n't."

His change of colour was sufficiently perceptible to attract her attention. An idea darted into her mind.

"You are curiously alike in some ways, you and May," she said slowly, and watching him. She was so experienced that she detected instantly the shade of embarrassment and self-consciousness—unlike anything she had witnessed before in Anthony—that the mere mention of May's name had produced. "Curiously alike, though there are so many years between you."

Anthony turned back to his work-table and took up his polishing-cloth, bending over the silver lamp so that she could no longer observe his face.

"It is very likely. We are cousins," he said, with that touch of coldness which intercourse with Erica seemed always, sooner or later, to bring into his voice.

But Erica was not deceived.

"I have been so wrapt up in my own affairs that I have never thought enough of that little mouse," she reflected. "I supposed she was taken up by Robin's attentions, which would have been so successful a

blind for every one had Anthony not happened to pass through the glen on that unlucky afternoon; and all the time she had been thinking of Anthony; and that is the secret of these perpetual visits to poor old Cousin Rosabelle!" Here Erica judged May according to her lights, being herself incapable of realising that Lady Denys would have been visited as often by May had Anthony not existed at all.

She passed in rapid mental review the occasions when she had seen May and Anthony together, Anthony bringing his little cousin home from her ride, escorting her from the Manor House, and asking her assistance in his various works and occupations. The conviction of their mutual secret preference grew.

"She is such a child, and he so old and grave, who would have thought it possible? But it is so," thought Erica, and in a measure this discovery soothed her vanity. "However, he is so simple and she so old-fashioned that I suppose they about meet on the same level after all. And thus he is out of my reach as the moon in the sky. Thank Heaven I was preserved from making any such revelation to him as that which I contemplated just now. Erica, my child, you may cure yourself of this fancy as soon as you choose. It need not be difficult. Say to yourself that he is a prig, and would never have suited you, and anything else you can think of. So that is the secret of his coldness. I might have known there must be somebody else," she thought, and her self-complacency was almost restored. "He had fallen in love with her before I ever appeared on the scene at all. I wonder how many years he will take over his wooing. They are both such ninnies that they probably hardly know the meaning of their own feelings yet. I have a mind to do the little brat a good turn. She has been a

trump to me, after all. Many a girl in her place would have made a fight for it before surrendering an only brother, and her position as mistress of the Abbey, to a pauper like me. But she never put a single spoke in my wheel. It's not in her. Suppose I were to show myself magnanimous for once."

She was, in fact, moved by a generous impulse towards May, quite as much as by the afterthought that she would be glad to have her pretty sister-in-law safely provided for, and married, and out of the way.

"Yes, you are cousins," she said slowly, "but I don't think she cares for you quite as a cousin—poor little May!"

Anthony made no manner of answer to this. He busied himself in putting away all his cleaning apparatus, leaving the six spotless lamps in a row upon the work-table.

"I had better say no more, but at all events I have put the idea into his head," she thought, in some trepidation, for she read the displeasure on his handsome face as he lifted the cans of oil into their appointed places.

She judged it best to bring back the conversation to her own affairs with what speed she might.

"If I lacked courage to take your advice, I wonder whether you would despise me very much? I wonder what you would say to me?" she said, in a hesitating and timid voice.

"I should say nothing. It would not be my business," said Anthony, in his calm, temperate tones. "You asked advice of me, and I gave it, because it appeared to me that I could not, under the circumstances, well refuse it; but, forgive me, you have a mother who would be your safest counsellor, I should imagine, in this or any other matter of the kind."

"Don't you know that it was my mother who made me accept Christopher?" she said.

Anthony was silent.

Erica rose and moved a step or two towards the door, and then turned, and stood with her back to it, facing him. She knew that she had failed, that the barrier between herself and Anthony had become, as it were, more impenetrable than ever—but she bore him no malice, for, in a measure, the completeness of her failure had done her the service of settling her own mind, and soothing the restlessness and vacillation of purpose which had been among the principal causes of her visit.

The hopelessness of her fancy for Anthony was made manifest even to her sanguine vanity. A noble exit was all that remained to her; she would leave him, not with displeasure and contempt, but with pity and sympathy uppermost in her mind; but, also, she must leave him in some measure prepared for the continuance of her engagement to Christopher.

She chose her words with no more hesitation, for that debility of doubt, which is the most enfeebling of all mental maladies, had been cured as though by magic, and her powers of thought restored. Her voice was perfectly pitched, low and clear, and vibrating with feeling. Her commanding figure was drawn up to its full height; her face eloquent of emotion, gratitude, and proud humility.

She would compel Anthony's admiration if she could not win his love; and she did compel it. He thought he had never seen her look so beautiful. Her attitude, half submissive, half defiant, conveyed at once a subtle challenge and a subtle flattery.

"Try not to think too badly of me if, after all, I decide that it is best for me to carry out my compact

and marry Christopher; and remember that, if I do, I shall do my best to make him happy," she said, with that thrill in her voice which was not the least of her charms. "Perhaps—perhaps—from the depths of the happiness which, I pray, may soon be yours—you will even be able to spare a little pity for me. Since I love another man, and yet am going to marry a lout of a boy who bores me to death, because my mother is poor."

It seemed to her that Anthony started, and that his eyes left her face, and were directed towards the open doorway at her back. And she turned, and came face to face with Christopher.

Of the three, it was Christopher who first recovered his self-possession.

"I changed my mind—and came—as you asked me —to fetch you home," he said.

He did not look at Erica directly nor offer to advance into the workshop, but she looked at him in secret terror and uneasiness.

How much had he heard, or had he not heard anything at all? There was no expression of any kind on his face beyond the usual sullenness of his heavy jaw and obstinately-set mouth.

"I 'll come at once," she said, with a forced laugh, which sounded nervous and unnatural even to herself. "I only came down here because May was talking to Lady Denys, and I thought two was company and three trumpery, so, by the same token, I 'll join you now and say good-bye to Mr. Denys."

"I 'm sorry to hear you have a bad cold, Chris," said Anthony, with neither more nor less than his usual calm friendliness.

"It 's nothing—only in my head," growled Chris-

topher. "I had a longish ride in my wet things yesterday."

"Stopped raining now," observed Anthony.

"For the moment. Are you ready?" Chris said to Erica, but still in the same expressionless tone, and not looking at her directly.

They walked away along the wet garden path side by side; the level of his hat was a little below the level of hers, and they went out by the door in the garden wall.

Anthony took a green-shaded silver lamp in either hand, and marched steadily up the stone steps of the little terrace, carrying them through the porch and into the Manor House.

Erica talked of everything and of nothing; of what she said she retained no after recollection, and it is probable that Chris did not hear a word until she asked him a definite question.

By this time they were already crossing the park; a fine drizzling rain had begun to fall, and Erica had unfolded her slender umbrella, and was carefully guarding her ruby velvet toque from the wet.

"Look here, Chris. I can't stand this any longer. You 're not paying the slightest attention to me," she said, with a heart that beat uncomfortably fast. She looked at his face and became frightened. "You 're as white as a sheet," she exclaimed, and almost forgot the uneasiness that possessed her in material alarm. "You ought not to have come out. Is your cold worse, or—or what 's the matter?"

"The matter is," said Chris, with a hoarseness for which his cold was not accountable, "that I heard what you said just now."

Her heart almost stopped beating. He had heard.

She tried to recall the exact words she had uttered, and could not. That is the worst of words having no foundation in fact, as Erica often had cause to discover, and she thought of the brutal truth of an old proverb anent the value of a good memory.

She had to think of something vague, and yet safe, to reply. She must not lose time. She must put this thing right at once.

"You mean you overheard part of what I said just now," she said, and she turned a cool and wary eye upon him. He was looking straight before him with an expression she remembered seeing once before. Only once. When? Again her memory played her false.

"It is very easy to misunderstand part of a conversation overheard," she said gently. "Tell me exactly what you did hear, what my words were, and I will give you the explanation."

"We won't talk about that, if you don't mind," said Chris slowly. "You see—it 's easy enough to explain what other people say. But what I 've heard you say with your own lips—that 's another thing. And I don't know that the words went for so much as the tone. I seemed to realise the—the depths of your contempt for me. Yes, that 's it," he repeated, as though surprised by the excellence of the phrase, "the depths of your contempt."

He paused for a moment, and then went on, in a heavy, listless kind of way.

"That 's it. I 've often felt you despised me, and I 'm sure I don't wonder, but I did n't know how much, till I heard what you said to old Anthony."

"I don't despise you. You were cross and hateful and sulky with your cold this morning, and I was vexed with you, and in a moment of temper I let it

out to Anthony. It was horrid of me. I own it. And I ask you to forgive me. There," she said, panting, for she was not accustomed to walk so fast, "I can't say more. And if you choose to go on being angry after I 've said this, I can't help it."

"I expect you don't understand," said Chris; he did not turn his head, but marched on, looking neither to the right nor to the left. "I 'm not angry with you."

"Not angry?"

"When you said," he went on slowly, "that you were only going to marry me because your mother was poor, I understood how it was that a beautiful girl like you had taken up with a bad-tempered, ugly, stupid chap like me. You 'll think me a fool not to have seen that earlier. But the fact is—I somehow fancied that you 'd be far above thinking of that sort of thing. When any one looks like—an angel—a fellow 's misled into thinking she 's an angel all through —true and—and square, and all that. But it was n't square to gull me into believing you cared when you did n't. You—you 've said what was n't true to me over and over again. You 've told me you cared, when all the time you loved some one else, and were only marrying me for my money. I 've no use for that sort of thing," said Chris simply. He paused, and went on again very deliberately. "Mind you, I 'm not blaming you. I expect one 's tempted to do all sorts of things when one has n't money, that a fellow who 's never known the want of it can't altogether understand."

Erica's throat and lips were dry, a common effect of the kind of mental terror that held her in its grip.

"Don't talk to me like that, Chris. I don't like it. Wait till we get indoors. I 'll—I 'll explain then."

"I 'm not coming indoors. I 've got to go back and ask old Anthony's advice about something,—I forget what. Oh, those papers Gethell sent about the agent." He put his hand into the pocket of his covert-coat, and half drew out a quantity of papers, and thrust them back again, crumpling them in his hand. "I—I forgot to give them to him. There were one or two things I wanted to ask him about, and I forgot——"

"About me?" she asked.

"About you? Nothing about you," said Christopher, surprised. "Why should I ask people about you? They come and tell me things, though," he said, recollecting Joe Murch. "I thought at the time they were n't true, but now I expect they very likely are——"

"What have they been telling you about me, Chris?" She tried to slip her hand under his arm, but he repelled her, not roughly, but quite decidedly.

"Don't!" he said, with boyish directness.

"Won't you tell me what they said?" Erica asked. She turned her lovely flushed face, and great china-blue eyes, swimming in tears, towards him. "I ought to know. How can I defend myself if you won't tell me?" she said piteously.

"I don't mind telling you," said Chris. "It 's about Robin Garry—that you said came after May; but it seems it was you he was after all the time."

"How could any one tell you such a thing? How could they know?"

"I suppose they found out you were deceiving me, the same as you found out about Captain Sandry deceiving me," he said simply.

Erica, who had hitherto seen no analogy between the two cases, felt a sudden flash of anger as he thus compared them, followed by the shame of conviction.

Suddenly she remembered that it was during her last interview with the agent that she had seen Christopher look as he looked now—weary, indifferent, calm, with the calmness of one who has made up his mind swiftly, but irrevocably.

"And you believed them?" she cried, clinging to her defence.

"I did n't believe them—at least, I tried not to," he said, "because, like an owl, I thought you cared for me. And now that I know from your own lips that you don't, why it does n't matter much to me, except as regards May, whether it 's true or not about Robin."

"How do you mean it does n't matter to you, when you 're engaged to me?"

"Ah, but you see," said Chris, with the same perfect boyish directness and simplicity, "that 's all off now. I 'm not going to marry a girl who 's bored to death with me. Not much! I may be a fool, but I 'm not such a fool as that comes to."

"Do you mean you—you would throw me over?" she said incredulously.

"Well," he said, considering, "if you like to put it like that. I don't call it quite a fair way of putting it, under the circumstances; but, still, I suppose it comes to that. Anyhow, it 's all off between us,—put it any way you like."

"Chris!"

There was a note of anguish in her voice, and yet, as always, in moments of desperation, an inclination to laugh beset her.

Not on account of her love affair with Tom, not because she had run insane risks of discovery in flirting with Robin, but because in a foolhardy moment of impulse she had uttered a few loud, boastful, and

untrue words was the cup to be dashed from her lips. She told herself that it was ridiculous, that it was unbearable, but she looked at the set expression of Christopher's mouth and the obstinate line of his heavy jaw. He walked on, taking no sort of notice of her cry, and she was obliged to hasten her footsteps to keep pace with him.

"Christopher!"

They had reached the open space before the Abbey door, and he stopped and faced her squarely, with his hands in the pockets of his covert-coat.

Plain as he was, and rendered plainer since his eyes were swollen and heavy with the heavy cold that was on him, he did not lack a certain dignity: the dignity of honesty, and of the courage that conceals pain.

He did not take his hands out of the pockets of his covert-coat, but he faced her, and as he did so she knew that neither would argument of hers shake him, nor entreaties of hers soften him ever any more.

"Good-bye!" he said. "I expect you won't care much about seeing me again, and I shall keep out of your way as much as I can. You and your mother must arrange to do what's most convenient for yourselves, and you'll explain what you like to her. I dare say she'll understand. I'm going back to the Manor House to see Anthony now, and when I come back I shall go straight to my own room, and stay there till—till my cold's all right again."

He took one hand out of his pocket, and just touched his cap to her, and then pulled it down lower over his brow, and turned his coat collar up a trifle more closely round his throat; then he wheeled round and marched away through the fine drizzling rain in the direction whence they had come.

Erica stood on the steps of the Abbey looking after him, and in the midst of an anger and mortification amounting almost to despair, she became conscious of a strange, vague, contradictory sensation of relief.

CHAPTER XXIV

ANTHONY carried the silver reading-lamps into the drawing-room of the Manor House, and there found May, who was sitting on a low stool beside Lady Denys, with her chin in her hands, and a rather pensive expression on her face. She jumped to her feet as Anthony entered and blushed as she greeted him.

He was, for once, in ruffled mood; and it was soothing to find himself presently playing his favourite melodies on his beloved fiddle, with May at the piano, and his old mother nodding over her book in her high-backed chair.

"I am afraid I cannot play for you very long," May said regretfully, "for I must be back before tea-time. Robin and Kathleen Garry are coming over."

"Robin and Kathleen Garry come over very often," said old Lady Denys, attracted by the names into sudden wakefulness. She smiled a little. "Tom Garry, too, seems to like visiting the Abbey."

"I like Tom better than Robin, though they are both nice boys," said May sedately; "but I like Kathleen a thousand times better than either."

Old Lady Denys said "Humph!" rather drily, and glanced significantly at her son; and then again curiously, for it seemed to her that even in the lamplight she could perceive that Anthony changed colour.

He walked home with May, and it rained very hard, and she had to take his arm since he held one large

umbrella over them both; and during the walk they were silent, but of this neither was aware, for each was so busied with thought and so conscious of mutual sympathy, that it seemed as though the other answered unspoken questions; so that the end of the walk came upon both as a surprise.

At the door of the Abbey Anthony said "Good-night," and it was as though the shaking of hands broke the spell that was upon them.

"It will be very nice," May said, "when December comes, for when I am at the Manor House I shall not have to break up our practice and rush away. We shall have time to learn a few of our pieces by heart in the long evenings, even if I cannot come to you for very long."

Anthony paused and seemed to hesitate, and then to hesitate no longer.

"I wish," he said quietly, "that you would come to me, and stay with me to the end of my days."

May looked up at him, and perceived the anxiety and earnestness of his expression, and answered him sincerely, and from the depths of the innocent heart that was filled with his image.

"If you really wish that, Cousin Anthony—why should n't I?" she said simply.

Erica went slowly up to her room, and changed her walking-suit for the brown princess gown, with the jewelled belt and collar, which of all her dresses she found the most becoming.

But she had never dressed herself so mechanically in her life; her brain seemed numb and refused to work. She was physically tired, for she had taken an unusual amount of exercise, while mentally she was unnerved.

A cheerful wood fire played on the open hearth of her bedroom, and was reflected pleasantly in the black panels of the walls and in the ceiling, which was also of oak.

The room was low, and divided by an archway above two steps. The smaller and lower apartment held the washhand-stand and presses for wardrobes, and the higher contained the royal bedstead, a curious ancient bureau—with innumerable pigeon-holes and boxes and secret drawers—which served as a dressing-table, and a big arm-chair beside the wide chimney.

As soon as Erica had finished dressing she moved slowly towards the fireplace, and then, with a little sigh, sank into the comfortable depths of the arm-chair. Her dulled thoughts glided into a slumber that never became wholly restful or unconscious, but was rather an uneasy dozing, haunted by waking dreams, through which rang again the echo of Tom's words.

"Nobody knows you as I do . . . the soul of you that you are trying to kill . . ."

She saw the brown eyes, filled with a man's courage and a boy's love, bent upon hers in sorrowful reproach; and the vision vanished, only to give place to the picture of a dying peasant, with grey face, old, unlovely, weather-beaten, yet content with simple certainty of duty done and hardship suffered. In her dreams Erica realised, as she had never realised waking, how little, things material may count for, how much, the abstract quality of sincerity—of pure and clear and single purpose—in the face of death.

A gentle knock at the door woke her fully, and she started up, with every sense newly alert again, and cried "Come in!"

May's pretty face looked round the door with apo-

logetic expression; she did not often visit Erica in her room.

"Do you know where Christopher is? Kathleen and Robin have come, and I can't find him. Did he not come in with you?"

"He brought me here," said Erica, "and went back to the Manor House to consult Mr. Denys about some business."

"Did he?" May's tone was surprised. "Anthony took the lamps in to Cousin Rosabelle, and stayed and played his fiddle for a little while, and then he walked home with me; but we did not meet Chris."

"Probably he went straight to the workshop and sat there smoking his pipe and waiting for Anthony," said Erica. "He meant to see him, and he would know it was only a question of waiting till half-past five." She paused, and a sudden impulse urged her to confide—at least, partially—in May. "Will you come in? I have something to tell you."

May came in—a little shadowy form in the firelight, in her pretty, clinging black frock with the white folds at throat and wrists, and her curly brown hair framing the delicate oval of her face.

"It is only—that my engagement—is broken off!" Erica said in a hard voice that sounded almost despairing, though yet in her heart she knew that she was a long way from despair, and that already her mind was busy again, active and energetic. Whatever she lacked, she lacked not courage, and with the brave, hope dies hard.

May stood still in consternation.

"Won't you shut the door?" said Erica.

May shut it instantly and came to the side of the arm-chair; the happy radiance died from her face; she looked down upon Erica in silence.

"At least, I suppose it is broken off. I have had no say in the matter," said Erica, with a laugh. "Chris has merely told me, in plain English, that he won't marry me."

"Why?" The word was only just breathed, and the flickering and final extinguishing of the flame that had lighted the room made it impossible to discern the expression of May's face.

"He got it into his head—you know how obstinate he is once an idea gets into his head—that I did n't love him."

May was silent.

"Won't you speak to me?"

"I don't know what to say, dear Erica," said May, in a low voice. "I have never—never thought that —you loved him. I have never understood how he could think so."

"Well, he does n't think so," said Erica grimly.

She paused, and then said, "Whether I love him or not, I meant, as I told you this morning, to make him a good wife. But it seems I 'm not to have the chance."

"I 'm very, very sorry!" said May; and she spoke as she felt, for the pain in Erica's voice was unmistakable.

"If I told you," said Erica, "that I was to blame —that my own fault and folly had brought this about —you—you would n't triumph over me?"

In the semi-darkness a little soft hand was put out to her, and she found May's face pressed against her own.

"If you said that to him, perhaps—whatever it was—he would forgive you," said May, and her generous heart swelled with pity.

"He won't. You don't know him as I do. It 's all

over. But I thought—if you knew—that you 'd help me through the rest of my time here."

A burnt-out log fell in with a crash, and the flames burst forth again and made the room bright.

"I 'll do anything I can."

"I suppose the only thing you can do is to order the car for us. We had better go away the first thing in the morning," said Erica calmly, "as Christopher wishes it."

"He can't—he can't wish to turn you out of the house like that," cried May.

"He did n't put his wish into words. He said we must do what was most convenient. But of course it can't be very convenient for him to stay in his own room day and night for very long; and that is what he proposes to do until we take our leave. Poor mamma! I 'm sorry for her. It will be a fearful shock, I 'm afraid. However, I shall let her have her night's rest before telling her anything about it, or she 'll be too ill to travel in the morning."

She rose and pressed her hand to her forehead with one of her dramatic gestures, half natural, half assumed.

"I 'm thinking—thinking hard all the time—what to do. May, will you come down with me now, and take Kathleen off somewhere, to your room, and leave me with Robin? I—I believe he would advise me best. I can easily get rid of mamma."

"Of course," said May. She wondered Erica should think it necessary to ask her, for she had seen her execute this manœuvre single-handed, and contrive to be left alone with Robin a dozen times. But that her assistance should thus be asked now, made her, if possible, a little sorrier for Erica, in her new-born humility.

"I can't think—it's really all over—so suddenly," she murmured, bewildered.

"Catastrophes are always sudden," said Erica.

"You know Christopher has a quick temper, and when he is angry——"

"That's just it. He wasn't angry. I have never seen him so calm before, except once, and that was the day when he turned Captain Sandry out of the house. Now it's my turn."

After this May said no more, and they descended to the banqueting-hall in silence, where sat Robin and Kathleen industriously making conversation over the tea-table with Lady Clow.

Erica was too impatient after all to wait for May to invite Kathleen upstairs; she drank a cup of tea in feverish haste, and challenged Robin to play her fifty up at billiards.

"By all means," he said. "Might I finish my muffin?"

"My dear Erica! They've been motoring ever since two o'clock. They must be starving," protested her mother.

Erica said nothing. She looked at Robin; and at her look he rose from his place, and left his muffin, and followed her across the hall and through the dark, narrow passage to the billiard-room.

Here was another roaring fire, and beside it Mr. Murch, with a tray of light refreshment at his elbow, slumbered peacefully.

Erica seized the poker and attacked the logs in the fireplace so vigorously that the sleeper woke with a terrific start.

"Did I wake you? I'm so sorry," she said with perfect indifference. "I came in here to talk to Mr. Garry. I wish you'd see if Chris has come in. Tea's ready in the hall."

She stood on the hearthrug, poker in hand, tall and majestic in her flowing brown draperies, and crown of red-gold hair; and Joe Murch, blinking and indignant, yet without sufficient courage or presence of mind to object, found himself shuffling apologetically out of the room.

"She beats cock-fighting!" he said piteously to himself in the passage. "She beats cock-fighting. Coming in and turning me outer my own corner. God knows I 've chose one that can't interfere with any one. And having the face to tell me—me—that she wants to talk to Bob Garry, a chap I can't bear, a chap that puts on side with me. To talk to him here alone, when she 's engaged to my best pal. I don't know what the world 's coming to."

"You 're a pretty cool hand," said Robin. He leant his back against the end of the billiard-table, and stood surveying her with mingled amusement and admiration. "Should n't wonder if you 'd hurt that beggar's feelings."

"When one 's driven into a corner one does n't stop to consider people's feelings."

"You certainly don't," he said with a laugh. "What do you mean—driven into a corner? The stag at bay, eh? You 're looking the part all right."

Her stately figure and white throat were drawn up, and her face was flushed and her eyes were bright with excitement.

"It seems somebody has been spying on you and me," she said, "and giving us away to Chris."

Robin whistled.

"I wonder who."

"What does it matter who? Perhaps the gentleman whose feelings you have just been commiserating."

Robin bent his soft brown eyes upon her enquiringly.

"Well?" he said.

"Well?" said Erica.

"Has Thorverton cut up rough?"

"He has cut up to such good purpose that our engagement is broken off. Or rather, in his civil manner, he has told me he won't marry me."

Robin whistled again, but more softly. His eyes left Erica's face and sought the log-fire.

"Final?" he asked, with an abstracted air.

"Absolutely."

Robin stared into the fire for a moment in silence, then slowly his eyes travelled back to Erica: over the long lines of her beautiful figure, and the jewelled belt at her waist and jewelled collar about her white throat, to her noble face, and the ruddy coils of her hair.

As he looked at her he realised more strongly than he had ever realised before how very lovely she was; and he also knew, more certainly than he had ever known before, that he did not want to marry her.

Nevertheless, he did not hesitate.

"I'm afraid I am offering you a poor exchange," he said rather ruefully, and with a whimsical uplifting of his handsome brows. "But here I am, ready to do what I can to make up to you for having got you into a scrape. Will you have me instead, Erica?"

She returned his look steadily, appraising him no less deliberately than he had appraised her.

"Suppose I said yes?" she said.

"Then, of course, I am in the seventh heaven," said Robin.

Her grey eyes grew sombre.

"I read you better than you dream," she said rather scornfully. "You are asking me, not because you

want to marry me, but to satisfy your own sense of honour, and incidentally to show me what a fine gentleman you are—ready to pay the full price for what he fancies."

"I never contradict a lady," said Robin lightly. "Do me the justice, however, to include the fact that I am very much in love with you."

"With my looks."

He smiled.

"How like a woman to make that a reproach! Of course, you want me to say that I love you because you are a blue-stocking, or because you are a saint, or because you are anything that you most manifestly are not. Well, I 'm not going to say anything of the sort. I love you because you 're beautiful, and, by Heaven, more beautiful at this moment in that dress, I think," he said, with a sudden thrill in his voice, "than I 've ever seen you before."

He quitted his lounging attitude, and came to her, and would have taken her into his arms, but that she made a quick gesture to repulse him.

"What! Are you going to refuse my offer?" said Robin, and his merry, confident brown eyes laughed into hers.

The carelessness of his tone, no less than his confidence, angered her, and her light eyes grew sombre again as she looked into his handsome, laughing face.

She felt as though her self-respect had been torn into rags, and her vanity smarted bitterly. She cast about in her mind for some method whereby she might ease that ache of mortification and the helpless hurt dignity of her womanhood, thrice wounded in one day.

The perception of the ephemeral nature of her fancy for Robin, and his for her, forced itself upon her as never before; and she longed to turn upon him, and

repay him scorn unutterable for his mockery, his confidence, and the lightness with which he dared to treat her.

But the cold water of caution quenched the flame of her inward fury. She thought of the sordid lodging which had been her home ever since she could remember. A little picture of her mother's living-room rose before her mind: the chiffonier with its mats and vases, its fly-blown chimney glass, its dreadful plush suite of furniture; and she recalled her own fierce determination to return thither no more. The plans which had already shaped themselves dimly in her brain, at the moment when her mental energy was restored, now became definite. Erica was herself again: keen, alert, wary, more than a match, she told herself with an almost fierce triumph, for Robin, and his easy good nature, and fancied superiority in wit, and self-command, and knowledge of the world and of human nature.

Her spirits suddenly rose. The gloom of her fair, knitted brows relaxed, her light-blue eyes sparkled, and her red lips parted in the slight smile that was the loveliest of all the expressions of her lovely face.

Robin watched her, fascinated, amused, half contemptuously assured of his power over her, yet secretly proud of it at one and the same time.

He did not altogether understand her sudden change to this most enchanting mood; but he found caprice adorable when allied to such an alluring form of beauty as was hers.

"Why won't you kiss me?" he said; "since we are going to get married, Erica?"

"I never mix up business and sentiment," she said. "We have settled nothing. When do you want me to marry you?"

"This minute!" he said, and took her hand and kneeled on one knee and kissed it.

It might have been Tom; for the brothers resembled each other strongly; but Robin paid his homage jestingly.

Erica looked down upon his curly head, and laid her hand upon it lightly, and laughed quietly to herself, and laughed again.

"It will cost you thirty shillings to get a license. Are you sure you can afford it? And you must have had your residence for fifteen days in the parish, and the license is available the very moment it is issued," she said.

"Where the deuce did you get all that information?" he asked, amazed.

"It is in *Whitaker's Almanac*," said Erica demurely.

"You darling! You've been looking it up. You made pretty sure of me."

"'But Brutus is an honourable man,'" said Erica softly.

"I hope so," said Robin, and he rose from his knee and kissed her with a certain air of gravity and responsibility which had hitherto been entirely lacking in his intercourse with her; and she regarded him with that faint amused smile which he did not understand.

"Are you going back to town to-night?" she asked.

"Has it not occurred to you, oh, Queen, that this is Friday afternoon?" he asked. "And is thy servant likely to hasten back to London for the week-end. No, I told my people that I should be with them until Sunday midnight; and Kathleen is the bearer of an invitation for you all to come over to-morrow for Badminton, tea, and what not; but under the circumstances——"

"Under the circumstances," she said drily, "the sooner I get back to London the better."

"I tell you what," he said, with that note of magnanimity which Erica most resented, sounding very clearly in his voice. "You shall tell Thorverton to-night that you're engaged to me, and make your mother take you to town to-morrow; and I'll meantime break the glad news of our engagement to my beloved parents. That is to say, I'll put off doing it until Sunday afternoon, so that if my mother raises too great a dust I shall only have to bear the brunt for a few hours. And then I'll come round about six on Monday, straight from my office, and see you, and we'll settle—oh—everything."

"You're not in such a desperate hurry after all, then," said Erica.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"There's no reason for desperate hurry, and none for undue delay. If my plans don't suit, it's up to you to suggest better ones, my Angel."

"They suit me very well," said Erica, and laughed again. "Perfectly. Except that I won't tell any one here of our—engagement—before I leave. It would be more convenient to write them my news from London."

"Your will is my law," said Robin.

To Lady Denys came that evening the content that is born of the warmth and snugness of a well-lighted room on a winter's evening. Rain without, beating against the pane, curtains drawn, a luxurious chair, a shaded lamp, a glowing fire, a favourite book, and familiar surroundings endeared by a thousand silent memories.

She heard footsteps that seemed to stumble over the

gravel path beneath her window, at the time when she was accustomed to listen for Anthony's tread; and she was sure the footsteps were not those of Anthony. To confirm her certainty came the sound of the door-bell, rung twice impatiently, yet with wavering clang, as though the iron ring had been pulled but weakly.

John Youatt's steady, ponderous tread approached, and his voice was raised in exclamation. Another voice sounded, and both continued in parley.

"Who can it be?" said Lady Denys impatiently. "Why cannot I jump up and see? But I am tied to this chair."

The drawing-room door was opened, and John Youatt stood in the doorway as though warding off the entry of some person unseen.

"It 's Master Christopher, my lady. Wet through. And I say as he is n't in a fit state to enter our drawing-room," said John Youatt, who still treated Christopher as though he were a tiresome schoolboy.

"It 's not a night you 'd care to turn a dog out of doors, Cousin Rosabelle," said Christopher outside. "I 've come to see Anthony. I thought he 'd be up from the workshop by this time, and I only asked John for something to keep out the cold."

"Brandy 's what he asked me for. Brandy. Be I tu give it him, or be I not?" asked John severely.

"Hold your tongue, John, and fetch whatever you 're told to fetch; and, Christopher, come in this moment!" cried Lady Denys.

Her sunken, dark eyes flashed, and she grasped her stick as though she would like to rise at once and come to Christopher's assistance.

The young man paused on the threshold.

"I dare say old John 's right. I ain't fit to come into your room," he said, with obviously chattering

teeth. "I 'll take my wet coat off in the hall, anyway."

"You 'll do nothing of the sort. You 'll wait till John comes back with the brandy, and then you 'll go up to Anthony's room and change every stitch of clothes on your back," said the old lady angrily. "What folly is this, Christopher?"

John Youatt came hurrying out of the dining-room with a bottle of brandy and a tumbler.

"I 'll get a drop of hot water from the kitchen, and then you can have a good stiff glass of grog, Master Christopher," he said, putting down the tray; but Christopher poured himself out half a tumbler of brandy with a shaking hand, and tossed it down his throat.

"I don't want grog mixed for me; I can mix my own," he said. "Where 's Anthony, Cousin Rosabelle? I wanted to ask his advice, and I—I felt so d——d queer that I thought I 'd best go for a walk first and pull myself together." He looked vaguely round the room as though searching for something, and then crossed to the fire and held out his hands to the blaze. "I meant to—to walk it off. You know how one does when one 's down on one's luck." His lip seemed to quiver. "And, like a fool, I walked on and on, taking no account of time; and it must have rained pretty hard for me to get into this state." He laughed and shivered.

"Chris, my poor, foolish boy—my poor Chris! What trouble have you got into?" she asked in her old voice, which trembled a little with pity and anxiety. "I wish Anthony would come," she said. "I am so helpless; and you ought to go and change."

"I 'm all right," said Christopher. "I feel quite different in this warm room and now I 've had a nip of brandy. Joe Murch was quite right. The only thing in the world to keep off a chill."

Here came the unmistakable sound of Anthony's footsteps— firm, measured, regular. He paused in surprise beside the open doorway, catching sight of Christopher stooping over the fire, and perceiving his drenched and miserable condition.

"Here is Anthony come to scold you for your foolhardiness," said Lady Denys, in a tone of great relief; and Christopher laughed again and shivered again.

"You won't get Anthony to scold me, though it 's not the first time you 've tried, Cousin Rosabelle," he said. "That 's why I always come to him for advice. He never scolds me. I 've been meaning to come all the afternoon. I 've got my pocket full of papers. Rotten applications and testimonials, and things of that sort. I expect they 've got wet. I was bringing them to show Anthony, but I was in trouble, and I forgot."

"He 'll catch his death of cold standing there in his wet things. Why don't you make him change?" cried Lady Denys querulously.

"I 'm all right. I hate being fussed over," said Chris sulkily.

Anthony stood beside him observing him attentively —the drenched clothes, the chattering teeth, bright eyes, and flushed skin.

"Come up to my room, old fellow," he said quietly. "We can talk there while you get into some dry things. What did you say these papers were that you wanted to ask me about?"

He led the way, and Christopher followed him mechanically upstairs and into a small room leading out of the picture-gallery. Here a fire blazed, the candles on the dressing-table were lighted, and Anthony's evening clothes were laid out upon the bed.

Christopher began to pull off his wet things, talking all the time.

"The papers—I 've forgotten all about the papers," he said vaguely. "Everything went out of my head. It 's all over between Erica and me, and I 'm glad. I tell you, I 'm glad; and yet I feel as if the world was coming to an end. I know now I 've been a great deal more unhappy than happy all the time. There 's always been something wrong, but I never knew exactly what. Now I know. And I won't marry her. I would n't marry her if I loved her twice as much as I do love her. I love her and I hate her at the same time, and I 'm the most miserable chap in the world. I wish—I wish——"

He broke down utterly.

"I—I 've got a beast of a pain in my side," he said, "and I 'm shivering like billy-oh. D' ye think I 'm going to be ill, Anthony?"

Erica sat before the escritoire in her bedroom, writing and rewriting a letter to Tom Garry by the light of a shaded electric lamp.

She tore up one page after another, rapidly and nervously, glancing meanwhile at the clock.

"I shall lose the post," she said presently in despair, and taking a fresh sheet, wrote a few hurried lines.

"I am no longer engaged to Christopher. He found out by chance that I was marrying him for mamma's sake, and not because I loved him, and he has set me free. If you do not believe this, I refer you to mamma. She will tell you what I only learned the day I became engaged to Christopher, that we have lived for years on the allowance his father made us, and which he has continued. I do not know whether he will go

on with it now or not. I only know I am very unhappy. If you really love me—if you wish to save me from myself, as you said—let all be as you planned. It will only be a day later. You wanted me to marry you to-day, and I refused. I will marry you to-morrow if you wish, in the same way, and under the same conditions. Mamma and I will come to London by the nine o'clock express, and you can meet us and let her go home, and take me with you. Telegraph only one word to me here the instant you get this. One word: 'Yes' or 'No.'

"ERICA."

She tried to read it, but tears blinded her eyes, and she folded it and placed it in the envelope which lay addressed and stamped ready to her hand, and ran downstairs with it. A footman was already lifting the locked mail-bag from the peg whereon it hung. Erica posted her letter, and turned and went into the banqueting-hall.

Here she found May alone, standing with a note in her hand beside an electric lamp, and with a rather anxious expression upon her face.

"I have a letter from Chris. I hope—I hope it does n't mean that he is really ill," she said anxiously, and handed it to Erica.

The pencil scrawl was so tremulous as to be almost illegible, in spite of the big round schoolboy hand which Christopher wrote.

"Dear May,—

"Don't be frightened, but I am so seedy that I've decided to stop where I am at the Manor House till my cold is well. It's right that you should be told my engagement is at an end. Don't let any

one come and see me. Anthony will bring you the news of me the first thing to-morrow morning, and explain to poor old Joe that he must pay the rest of his visit another time. Send over Cloberry and my things.—Your aff. brother,

"CHRIS."

"What do you think?" said May, with anxious blue eyes fixed on Erica's face.

"I think," said Erica, with a quiver of her lips, and a little laugh, that was half a sob, in her throat, "that Christopher means to stay at the Manor House until mamma and I are safely out of the way; and that if you will be good enough to give the necessary orders, we'll start for London by the nine o'clock train to-morrow morning."

CHAPTER XXV

"ANTHONY! Is that you?"

Christopher raised himself on his elbow and stared with bright, bloodshot eyes; his face was dusky with fever, his breath panting.

"Yes, old boy."

"I say—have I been dreaming, or was Dobree here?"

"He 's here now—asleep in the next room."

"Have I been bad?" gasped Chris, looking rather frightened. "I feel rotten. My head 's all confused."

"Try not to talk. You 'll be more comfortable presently, I hope."

"I 'm in such frightful pain," said the boy, falling back, and catching a sob in his short, panting breath. "I don't want to make an ass of myself. I say, I 'm afraid you 've been up all night."

"I shall go off and lie down now that you 're better."

"I don't feel as if I were better!" gasped Chris. "I 'm burning all over, and my head 's swimming. I 've been talking a lot, have n't I?"

"Only muttering to yourself."

"I was worried. I thought I saw a lot of people about. I suppose I was off my nut."

"There 's only the nurse," said Anthony soothingly. "I hope you don't mind. I 'm afraid I could n't manage by myself. There are poultices to be made, you see."

"I don't mind anything that 'll save trouble," said

Christopher hoarsely. "I wish I did n't feel so—so rotten. What is it?"

"A touch of pleurisy."

"I say—is that dangerous?"

"I hope not," said Anthony in his quiet, reassuring tones. "If you 'll let yourself be properly nursed and do exactly what Dobree orders."

Chris was silent for a few minutes, striving in vain to repress the short, harsh cough which gave him such obvious and intense pain.

He suffered the ministrations of the nurse in silence, and even muttered a gruff word that sounded like thanks when the applications of fresh hot fomentations gave him a momentary relief; but his unnaturally bright eyes looked alarmed when Anthony made a slight movement, and he panted out:

"Don't go—Anthony. There 's something I wanted to say. Have n't I been trying to say it to you all night? Or was I only dreaming, I wonder."

"I 'm afraid you really ought not to try and talk, old boy."

Chris moved restlessly.

"If he 's got something on his mind he 'd better say it, and then he 'll settle quietly to sleep," said the nurse, with an expressive look at Anthony. "I 'm taking all these things into the next room, so I shan't hear."

"Yes—that 's right," said Chris, gratefully. "I 'd rather get it off my chest."

She went away softly and shut the communicating door, and Anthony came closer to the bedside.

"Is she gone?" said Chris. "Well, look here, it 's about May. That fellow, Bob Garry—he 's not a bad sort at heart—but—but he 's been hanging about a good deal. I 'm so confused I can't think very clearly.

I 'm afraid Erica—I don't know how to put it. I shall be saying something I 'd better not," he said, with that short, gasping, painful sob which was so distressing to hear. " But the thing is this. I—I can't have poor little May's heart broken. She 's—she 's got nobody but me to stand up for her, d' ye see? And I wanted your advice. Joe Murch thinks I ought to—speak to Robin—and ask him his intentions or something of that sort, and I thought I 'd ask you if that 's the right thing, or if you could suggest something different."

" I don't think I should do that, old boy," said Anthony gently. " I don't think it 's necessary, and I am sure your sister would not like it."

" D' ye think not? I don't want to do anything she would n't like. I suppose you could n't—could you—see about it for me? "

Anthony touched the burning hand that lay on the coverlet.

" Yes," he said, " I 'll see about it."

" That 's all right." An infinite relief sounded in the panting tone. " There 's only one other thing."

Anthony waited.

" Suppose I went off my onion again, or suppose I —I got worse, and went out altogether—of course, I know it 's not very likely—but, you see, one never knows," he whispered hoarsely. " I might n't be able to explain anything. And I want you to know I 've —I 've done what my father told me to do."

" All right, old boy."

" Wait—you don't understand. When I came of age he told me he 'd left me the Abbey—and everything; and that he hoped I 'd marry young and have a son of my own. But that if I did n't he hoped I 'd —leave the Abbey to you."

Anthony made no sound.

"He said that was—what he wished—but he would n't bind me. You see, he had n't a single male relative of his own, and he knew I was—fond of you and all that, and you were the nearest male relative I 'd got in the world. And he wanted it to go to you. So I 've left it—as he said. I put off doing it—because I thought I was sure to marry—and have a son; but I got it into my head the other day I ought to provide for—Erica, in case anything happened to me before we got married, so I got Gethell to draw me up a temporary will, and I signed it. Cloberry and Joe Murch witnessed it. I—I provided for Erica—as well as May," he said, with trembling lips, "and I 'm glad I did, for she 's a cousin, d' ye see, though it 's so distant—and she and her mother have n't a penny in the world. It—it may make things a bit easier for them. But the only thing I 'm afraid of is—is what little May will think." His cough ended in another sob, and the tears glittered in his eyes. He turned his flushed face away from Anthony, ashamed of his emotion. "And yet I—I can't go against my father's wish. Only I want you to explain to her—it was because he wanted the Abbey to go, you know, like the Salic law—not to women and girls. So that she won't think it unkind of me—you could tell her better than I."

"I hope the necessity for telling her may never arise," said Anthony gently, "but if it should, Chris, I don't think, in the end, it would make much difference whether you left the Abbey to her—or to me."

Chris fixed those blue glassy eyes on his face.

"Do you mean," he gasped in wonder, "you 're going to marry her?"

"I think so—I hope so," said Anthony quietly.

"I 'm afraid you 'll think me rather old for her; but if she does n't mind that, I hope you won't."

"Mind!" said Christopher, and he sank back with a sob of relief and joy and laughter all in one. "Mind! Why, I 'd rather it was you who married my sister than any one else in the world."

A grey, chill November morning dawned, and at about eight o'clock a housemaid came tapping at Erica's door with a telegram.

"The messenger is waiting to know if there 's any answer, miss?"

Erica stood beside the dressing-table, in her long blue gown, and tore open the envelope and read the contents without any air of interest. Then she raised her cold blue eyes to the housemaid's inquisitive face.

"No answer, thank you."

"Thank you, miss."

Erica remained motionless until the door closed, then she sprang across the room, turned the key in the lock, threw herself on her knees beside the bed, and buried her face in her arms.

She had not shed a tear through the long wakeful hours of the night, but her eyes were wet now.

The signs of packing were all about the room, and her preparations for departure were almost complete.

She had worked and planned and thought with feverish energy all night, bending over her trunks with their overflowing contents, or lying awake wide-eyed and dry-lipped on the bed, staring upwards through the darkness, waiting for day.

She had braced herself for any further mortification that might be in store for her with almost desperate courage; standing, as it were, at bay, as Robin had

said, among the ruins of the beautiful castle in Spain that had tumbled about her ears.

In this, her dark hour, she saw at last clearly the vanity of her vacillations; and the folly of her cunning was made manifest to her.

She did not consciously utter vows, nor offer prayers, out of her misery; nevertheless, her heart was burning with one resolve, her thoughts were concentrated into one voiceless entreaty.

She writhed with mortification because she realised that in spite of her beauty, her wit, her strength of will, her daring, and her shrewdness—qualities on which she greatly prided herself—she had, in the end, earned only contempt from those whom she had most exerted herself to please.

Contempt was perhaps a harsh name for Anthony's grave pity; but it was under this guise that his calm disapproval presented itself to Erica's tortured recollection. Contempt shone through all Robin's admiration of her; through his infatuation for her beauty, through his careless love-making and reckless proposal.

But most clear and unmistakable of all had been the contempt in the eyes and the voice and the action of Christopher Thorverton; the dull, stupid, ill-mannered boy, whose judgment she would once have scorned, and whose simple condemnation now humiliated her beyond endurance:

"I've no use for that sort of thing."

Only in the memory of Tom Garry's pleading was any comfort to be found, and the words which, at the time they were uttered, had seemed to make so little impression upon her, now found echo in her heart and brain:

"It's in you to be so different . . . With that face

you were never meant to lie and plot and scheme—you were meant to be true and sweet and honest . . ."

Well, she had humbled herself and written to Tom. But was not her very letter founded on a lie?

"I did not mean it. I wrote in a hurry. It was involuntary," she said to herself and then started at the implication of a habit ingrained with thought.

"It shall be the last time—the last time!" This was the unconscious vow. "Give me this one chance!" This was the voiceless prayer of the soul that Tom told her she had tried to kill.

She kneeled by the bedside, with his message crushed in her hand, sobbing in a passion of relief that held more of gratitude than that narrow, self-concentrated nature had ever known.

The telegram contained only one word:

"*Come.*"

Lady Clow was placidly enjoying her morning cup of tea, when Erica entered her bedroom; her eyes immediately grew round with apprehension.

"Is anything wrong?" she gasped, knowing that her daughter generally rose at a much later hour, and perceiving her to be already nearly dressed, though her magnificent hair hung about the shoulders of her blue wrapper like a cloak of molten gold.

"No," said Erica. "But you must get up at once and dress. We are going away. I'll pack for you. The car is ordered for us, and we are to catch the nine-fifteen express to London."

"Erica!" screamed Lady Clow; "you are asking the impossible. How can we go away at a moment's notice like this? What will Christopher say? What will everybody say? Above all, why should we?"

"I will explain all that on the way. There is n't a moment to lose now!" said Erica imperiously.

Putting forth the strength of her mighty white arms, she lifted Lady Clow's solitary large trunk out of the dress-closet, in which it had been safely bestowed, and produced her shabby hold-all and handbag from a corner.

"Erica! Once for all, I won't do it!" said Lady Clow, growing pale as she perceived from these preparations that her daughter was in earnest.

Like most weak people she was liable to be obstinate in an emergency, and Erica, without delaying her work of unstrapping the trunk for a moment, rapidly revolved in her mind her plan of action, and decided it would be safer under the circumstances to propitiate than to bully her mother.

"If you don't come with me I shall go away alone," she said pathetically.

"How can you go away at all when poor Christopher is so far from well with his cold, and not even able to come home last night? I never heard anything so heartless and abominable. I tell you I won't do it!" gasped Lady Clow. "Without rhyme and without reason. To be sitting here comfortably in my bed one minute, and out in a nasty motor dashing through an unwholesome November mist to a draughty railway station the next—and not even told why!"

Erica had lifted the trunk on to a couple of chairs, propped open the lid, and was now rapidly taking down and folding Lady Clow's well-worn black gowns, and her scanty store of plain linen. She could not avoid a contrasting glance towards a little heap of her own delicate lace-frilled lawn garments, which lay beside her mother's work-basket—familiar object of

her childhood's earliest memory—and which had been newly threaded by her mother's hands with gay blue ribbons ready for Erica's wear.

She stood erect, grave and majestic, shaking the bright mass of hair from her beautiful face with the mien of a reproachful angel.

"Without rhyme or reason," she said slowly. "If your child comes to you unhappy and in trouble, and begging you to take her away—to take her home—is n't that enough?"

"Oh, my darling, my dear, my little one!" cried Lady Clow, bursting into tears. "When you speak to me like that! As if your mother could ever fail you! Ring for the housemaid and let her pack for me, and go and put your pretty hair up. You must n't tire yourself packing for me, my darling. Trust your mother; she 'll be ready in time, never fear."

"I thought the third person would do it," said Erica; but if there was a laugh in her throat there was a tear in her eye, as she hurried back to her own room.

After an equally futile protest, and by a train which left Bursdon Junction only a couple of hours later than the 9.15, Joe Murch found himself likewise taking his departure from the Abbey, much against his will, and in company with his dog Bingo.

"You must see that it will be impossible for you to stay on, since Miss Thorverton is alone," said Anthony Denys, who, to Joe's dismay and alarm, suddenly made his appearance in the dining-room, where Mr. Murch was placidly seated at breakfast, ruminating greatly over his coffee and bacon as to the why and the wherefore of the sudden recall to town of Lady Clow and her daughter.

"I would n't be in anybody's way," said Joe.

"Quite impossible," said Mr. Denys, politely ignoring this hint. "I need only appeal to your good sense and knowledge of the world."

"I know the world. No man better," said Joe.

"Exactly. I was very sure you would see the proper thing to do."

"But I don't like leaving an old pal when he 's ill. It seems ungrateful. Pneumonia 's a very serious thing," pleaded Mr. Murch.

"It is very serious indeed, I am sorry to say. But I will see that you are kept informed of his progress."

"May n't I run over to your little shop and say good-bye?"

His entreaties dashed themselves in vain against the rock of Anthony's gentle imperturbability.

At eleven o'clock, therefore, he found himself standing beside a pile of his own baggage in the outer hall; not very clear how he got there, and doing his best to fortify himself against the hardships of the journey by dosing himself with cherry brandy.

His reminiscences of Christopher during the process became, as usual, slightly tearful.

"You doe know what a good friend he 's bin to me, Mr. Denys," he said. "My ol' mother could tell you. There 's a wonderful woman! Lived on the smell of an oiled rag, Mr. Denys, for years, so as I should have my chance at the 'Varsity. And after all her pinching and screwing I never got it. I was sent down. It was a cruel thing. I 'll tell you all about it one day. I went on my knees to them. But what did they care about a poor old woman? What was it to them that she 'd starved herself to get me there? I could cry when I think of it. If you 'd have seen

her face when she heard, Mr. Denys! And all she said was, 'Never mind, Joey. I ought to have known better than to send you up,' she said. Poor soul, and she'd set her heart on me being a parson. A rum parson I should have made. She's been a good mother to me, bless her. She won't be pleased to see me back, though," he said, looking rather alarmed. "I wish I could have given her a couple of days' notice. You'll understand my feelings, Mr. Denys? I need n't apologise to you; since you've got a mother yourself, you'll understand."

"Perfectly."

"Poor old Chris!" said Joe, reverting once more to his absent host. "Here's to his quick recovery, Mr. Denys. A friend in need,—that's what I've always called him. Paid up for me, Chris did. Paid up without a murmur, and helped me out of the worst scrape I ever was in; but I'll tell you about that another time, when we're alone," said Joe, suddenly becoming conscious of the attentive presence of a young footman. "There's the car. But where's Miss Thorverton? I can't go without saying 'Good-bye' to her. After all, she is my hostess," said Mr. Murch reproachfully.

"She went over to the Manor House an hour ago. She is with my mother," said Anthony. "You will excuse her, I know, but she is naturally in great anxiety about her brother."

"D'ye think it's really as serious as all that?" said Joe, with a frightened look.

The news of Christopher Thorverton's illness, of the breaking-off of his engagement, and of the sudden departure from the Abbey of Lady Clow and her daughter, spread through the neighbourhood like wild-

fire, gathering strength and volume in the telling, as is usual in such cases.

Lady Erriff was one of the first to be informed of the current gossip, and flew to pour it into the ears of her lord.

"Darling, is n't it dreadful? But it just shows how right I am in my judgments, and I feel sure now you will be sorry you encouraged her by paying her so much attention before every one, but, as I always tell you, you get carried away by people's looks."

"You have certainly said something of the kind, and more than once, if I recollect rightly," said Lord Erriff.

"Well, you see what it ends in, darling," said Lady Erriff warningly. "She 's deliberately jilted him, and he 's in despair. There 's a rumour that he flung himself into the lake, and that Anthony Denys pulled him out; but I give you that for what it 's worth, as it was only the Bursdon butcher who mentioned it. It would be just like Anthony Denys. However, Mr. Amery assures me that that is not true, and that he knows for a fact that the poor young man——"

"What poor young man, my dear?"

Lady Erriff assumed the consciously mild expression of a good wife trying to be patient under the exhibition of a husband's abnormal stupidity.

"I wish you would n't let your attention wander so when I 'm speaking, darling. I know you won't mind my telling you of it, but it 's a habit that seems to grow upon you," she said gently. "And who could I be speaking of but poor young Thorverton? Mr. Amery says it was only that he went out for a long walk and got caught in the rain; but, as I could n't help pointing out to him, people don't get double pneumonia as easily as all that, and especially a

sturdy young man like Mr. Thorverton. Of course his heart is broken—for the moment," she added hastily. "Luckily things of that kind don't last. But you see now what a designing minx she must have been. She only accepted him for his money, and then, getting her head completely turned with too much attention, and Russian sables which cost five hundred pounds, and one thing and another, she has thrown him over and run away to London with that dreadful Mr. Murch, who is certainly much more suited to her in every way, and who has n't, I am told, a farthing in the world. So you see how right I was when I told you she was not a nice girl."

"You are always right, my dear, and I am always sorry to hear of any girl not being nice. I presume you are speaking of Miss Erica Clow?"

"Who else could I be speaking of? Really, Tom, one would think you did it on purpose. However, it is a great comfort to think it is all off. I should not have liked her as a neighbour at all."

"I am very sorry for poor young Thorverton," said Lord Erriff. "She was an uncommonly pretty girl, and had a dry humour of her own. I should think something might have been made of her, if she had fallen into the right hands. She was certainly very unsuited to young Thorverton, however. But I cannot see why you should accuse her of wanting to marry for money, if she has run away, as you say, with a man who has n't got a farthing."

"My dear, I said I gave it you for what it is worth. Rumour says she threw him over, but I should think it far more likely he got tired of her," said Lady Erriff, shifting her ground with perfect calm. "She was very bad form, and he may have found out he liked other people better, and had made a foolish mis-

take,"—significantly. "I thought it very marked, his being so anxious to lend his horses to Kathleen. Of course it's too soon to think of anything yet, but——"

"But then, what becomes of his having thrown himself into the river?" said Lord Erriff, and he raised one eyebrow slightly.

"Darling, don't try to be funny when I'm talking seriously. I told you that was only the butcher," said his wife. "I shall send Robin to inquire; you know how glad he is of any excuse to visit that dear little May. I am all for young people's being allowed to visit each other. How can they marry if they never meet? Robin would be all the happier with a wife to manage him. He wants a great deal of managing. I hope all my children will marry young, boys and girls, and May Thorverton's twenty thousand pounds will be very useful to Robin."

"I have no doubt it would. But I would not advise you to count too surely on it," said Lord Erriff drily.

"Life would be very dull, Tom, if I were never to be allowed to form any plans at all for my children's future," said Lady Erriff, with dignity. "I think it is a pity you should be such a pessimist, darling; but I shall not allow you to depress me. 'Hope on, hope ever,' is my motto, and I make it a rule to look on the bright side of everything."

Robin, to his mother's vexation, declined to be sent over to Moreleigh to enquire after Christopher.

The young gentleman was suffering the pangs of a not unreasonable self-reproach, and his feelings were divided between pity for Christopher and anger with himself.

"Poor devil—and yet, if he did but know it, he's probably less to be pitied than I am," he thought drearily. "I wonder why the deuce I ever began

it." A night's reflection had caused him to regret his impetuous proposal of the previous evening, and to regard with dismay the prospect of immediate matrimony. "I 'll write to Erica and tell her we must put off announcing our engagement until the poor chap 's out of the wood, anyway," he said to himself; catching thus thankfully at the straw of postponement. "If he 's half as bad as old Amery makes out, it would n't be decent to say anything about it yet."

On the following Monday Robin congratulated himself exceedingly on his prudent reticence, when a telegram from his parents summoned him home scarcely twelve hours after he had left them, and when he learnt the news of his brother's marriage to Erica.

He received the intelligence with his customary insouciance; scarcely knowing for a moment whether to be amused or angry; but habit prevailed, and he laughed till the tears rolled down his cheeks, and then grew grave.

"Poor old dad. This will be a blow to him," he thought. "It had better have been me than Tom."

He remembered somewhat ruefully the slight flavour of condescension in the tone of his proposal to Erica, and understood that this was the manner of her revenge; but if his vanity were wounded thereby, his sense of humour was gratified, and the relief of knowing himself to be free far outweighed every other consideration.

Also, he understood that the marriage must have taken place before either Tom or Erica could have heard of the serious nature of Christopher's illness, and he acquitted them both of heartlessness, though his mother did not.

"All my hopes are ruined," wailed Lady Erriff, oblivious of her boasted philosophy. "I hear now that May Thorverton is to marry Anthony Denys—old enough to be her father—and that poor young Thorverton is dying, and, on the top of everything, Tom married, actually married, to that designing minx without a halfpenny in the world. If she had had money it would have been bad enough, but as it is——"

"If she had had money, my dear, she would have been welcome as flowers in May," said Lord Erriff drily.

"How can you say she would be welcome, when it is she who will have killed poor young Thorverton, if he dies?"

"I cannot quite agree to that. If young Thorverton had been more temperate in his habits, poor lad, there seems little doubt that this illness would not have gone so badly with him; though I am as sorry for him as any one can be, and though I am afraid he has been very badly treated. But if you blame the young lady, you must also blame Tom."

"I am quite certain he had nothing to do with it. It was entirely the girl's fault," said his wife, weeping indignantly. "How could Tom have married her if she had n't wished it? I am only sorry for poor Tom."

"My dear, Tom can take care of himself," said Lord Erriff grimly. "He is not a Garry for nothing, and has behaved as other Garrys, I am sorry to say, have behaved before him. History repeats itself."

He thought of his dead brother—who had been as daring, as handsome, and as light-hearted as young Tom and Robin were now—and of that other Christopher Thorverton who had been his brother's

friend—and of a whispered story now forgotten." "Perhaps this time it is a Garry who will pay," he thought.

Old Lady Denys sat in her favourite corner of the drawing-room in the Manor House, with her book on her lap and her thoughts far away.

She was very old, and could ill bear suspense and anxiety; also her conscience smote her bitterly. The recollection of secret wishes tormented her, and even while she trembled and prayed against their fulfilment now, she could not forget them.

Her happiness in the happiness of her son, and of his little betrothed wife—which was apparent through all the honest sorrowful anxiety that was theirs—was poisoned by these memories, and thus late in life she was learning the bitter lesson that not in the fulfilment of ambition, but in peace of mind alone, may content be found.

It was the seventh day of Christopher's illness, and during all the past week he had grown steadily worse, so that two nurses were now in constant attendance, and a great doctor had been summoned from London to consult with Dr. Dobree, who had taken, as Anthony sorrowfully told May, a very serious view of the patient's condition.

May had entered the sick-room but seldom, since Christopher had been almost continually delirious or in a state of stupor, and the nurses left nothing for any one else to do; but on the morning of the seventh day a change was apparent; Christopher seemed slightly better, and she was allowed to visit him for a moment.

He appeared to know her, and smiled faintly; but his livid, swollen face and loud breathing had terrified